Kino no Tabi Volume2

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These are novel illustrations that were included in volume 2

キノの旅Ⅱ

the Beautiful World

砂と岩の砂漠の真ん中で、キノは空を見上げていた。晴れている。

頭を下げて、石造りの口を開ける井戸を見た。涸れている。

「だから言ったとおりだよ。最初からこれじゃあ旅なんて無理だよ。キノ。旅人に一番必要なのは、決断力だよ。それは新人でも、熟練の旅人でも同じ。違う？」

「いいや、エルメス。それはきっと運だよ。旅人に一番必要なのは、最後まであがいた後に自分を助けてくれるもの。運さ」

人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、今までにない新感覚ノベル第２弾!!

し-8-2
キノの旅Ⅱ the Beautiful World
時雨沢恵一
電撃文庫
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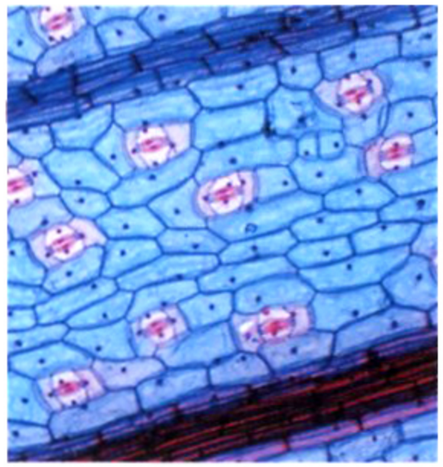


作者近（×300）影

しぐさわけいいち
時雨沢恵一

1972年製。バイクで旅をするのが好き。心配性なので何でもかんでも持っていこうとするのが難点。夢は愛車での世界一周。実はなんと既に実行中で、現在は東半球アジア地区日本国関東圏埼玉東部をじっくりと走破しています。「近所にラーメン食べに行ってるだけじゃん」……そうとも言います。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ　the Beautiful World

くろぼしこうはく
イラスト:黒星紅白

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅 II

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢 恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト：黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

CONTENTS

口絵　「狙撃兵の話」—Fatalism— 2

プロローグ「砂漠の真ん中で・b」—Beginner's Luck・b— 11

第一話「人を喰った話」—I Want to Live.— 14

第二話「過保護」—Do You Need It?— 46

第三話「魔法使いの国」—Potentials of Magic— 56

第四話「自由報道の国」—Believers— 98

第五話「絵の話」—Happiness— 122

第六話「帰郷」—"She" is Waiting For You.— 132

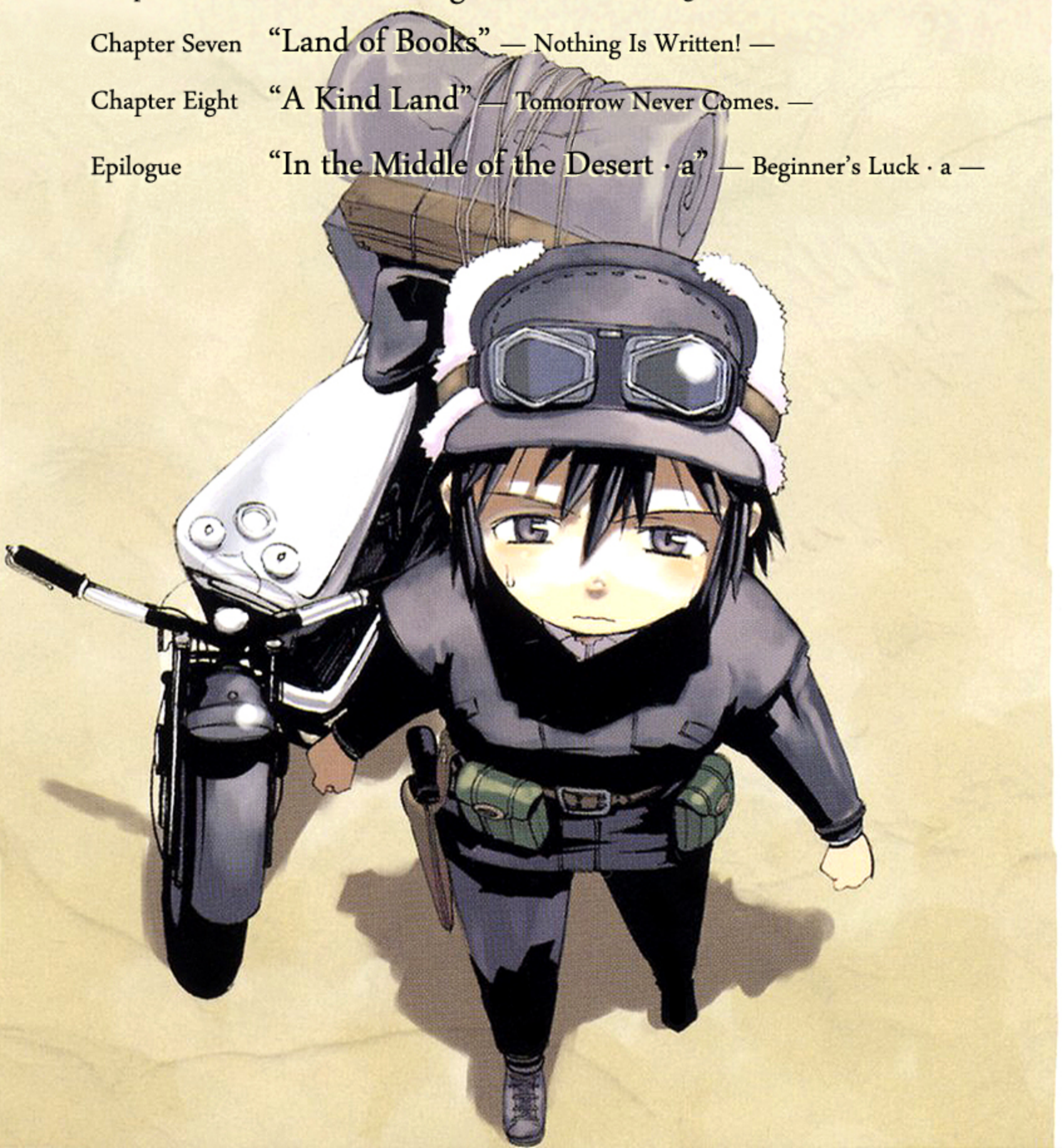
第七話「本の国」—Nothing Is Written!— 146

第八話「優しい国」—Tomorrow Never Comes.— 170

エピローグ「砂漠の真ん中で・a」—Beginner's Luck・a— 222

CONTENTS

Frontispiece	"A Tale of a Sniper"	— Fatalism —
Prologue	"In the Middle of the Desert · b"	— Beginner's Luck · b —
Chapter One	"A Tale of Feeding Off Others"	— I Want to Live. —
Chapter Two	"Overprotection"	— Do You Need It? —
Chapter Three	"Land of Wizards"	— Potentials of Magic —
Chapter Four	"Land of Free Press"	— Believers —
Chapter Five	"A Picture's Tale"	— Happiness —
Chapter Six	"Homecoming"	— "She" is Waiting For You. —
Chapter Seven	"Land of Books"	— Nothing Is Written! —
Chapter Eight	"A Kind Land"	— Tomorrow Never Comes. —
Epilogue	"In the Middle of the Desert · a"	— Beginner's Luck · a —



What is right? Who is right?

Is anything right? Is anyone right?

— What is “right”? —

“A Tale of a Sniper” —Fatalism—

Frontispiece

"A Tale of a Sniper"

— Fatalism —

There was a dense forest. And there was a tall hill, from which one could observe the forest in its entirety.

On top of that hill, a sniper lay in wait. Armed with a powerful long-range persuader (Note: A gun) built for sniping, he kept a watchful eye over every corner of the forest.

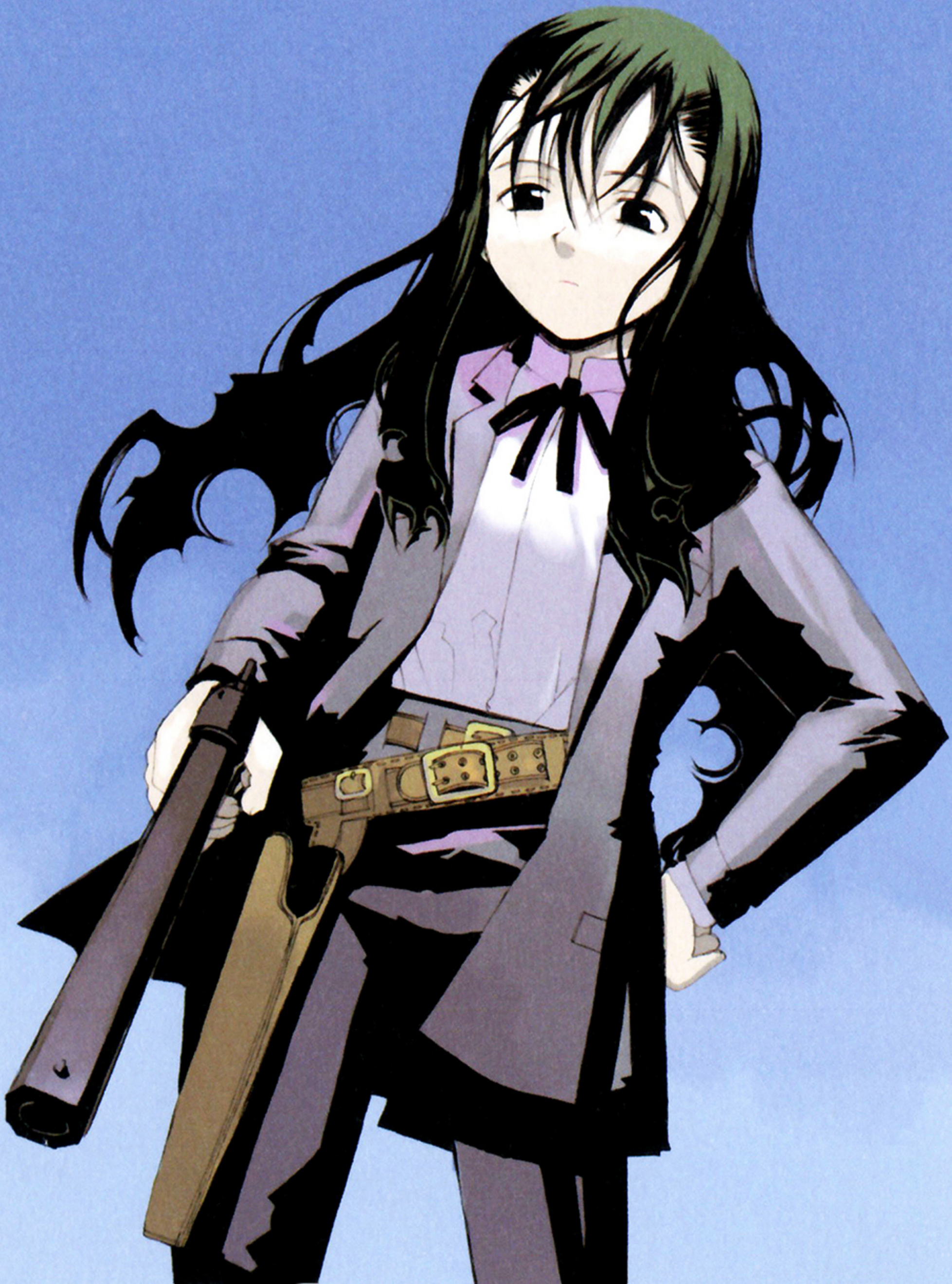
Something moved beside a serene lake. The sniper shifted his attention in that direction.

The image of a joyful looking man, stark naked, was reflected on the sniper's eyes.

The sniper hesitated for a while, then brought his rifle to bear down on the short, but rather good-looking man. Once he pulled the trigger, and the bullet flew at an amazing speed, the man would probably be dead, and the lake would probably be tainted with a bloody red.

The sniper slowed his breathing to reduce any shaking in his hand. When he was ready, his finger reached for the trigger.

"Please don't do that."



The sniper heard a sharp, determined voice speak behind him. Caught up in surprise, he slowly turned his head, and came face to face with a woman.

She wore elegant clothing, and had dark glossy hair. A beautiful woman, without a doubt. With her right hand she held a high-caliber revolver, aimed squarely at the sniper’s head.

“Sorry to have frightened you, but please don’t move. If I miss, it would be a waste of bullet and powder.”

“Why do you want to kill me?” the sniper asked guardedly.

The woman smiled, her persuader never moving an inch.

“Because you have killed those who entered the forest. The friends and families of the victims wanted you dead. ”

The sniper replied tensely now, “So you are here to kill me.”

The woman nodded and the sniper continued, “What are you waiting for, then?”

A pained look appeared on the woman’s face. “Good question.” The woman ventured to explain. “Actually, after I accepted this assignment, I had agreed to another contract from some people from the same country.

“They paid me equally to not kill you because they wished for everything to remain unchanged. There are many who hate you. But there are people who are grateful to you for removing their enemy, letting them receive their inheritance early, releasing those with incurable diseases and allowing some to start anew. So there are just as many people who wish for you to remain alive. To them, you are like a god of good fortune .”

“Really.”

“I was indecisive on what to do as I came here to scout you out. I still can’t make up my mind right now.”

“If that’s the case…”

“If that’s the case?”

“If that’s the case, then please give me an order. Before now, I would kill all who I found, but from now on I will only kill a person upon a certain count. That way, the number of deaths would drop yet there will still be victims. As for this count, it is up to you to provide.”

“I see.”

The woman gave the sniper a number then left him on the hill and returned to the forest. Since it was a complex number that required very difficult calculations, it will not be written here.

At the lake, the man was still swimming naked in the water. Upon seeing the woman, he ran towards her with a look as if he was about to cry.

“Master! What took you so long! I thought we were done for.”

The woman stood rooted to her spot and told him to shut up and put on his pants.

As the man pulled on his pants, he turned to face the woman.

“We are still alive. That means you killed him right?”

“Nope.”

The man leaped when he heard this, accidentally putting both legs into the same leg of his long pants, causing him to trip and fall.

The woman explained the deal.

"B-but with that number, the possibility of getting shot at any moment is…"

The woman barely gave the matter any thought and walked towards their car, a run-down little vehicle on the verge of falling apart. The man hastily followed her.

Once inside the car, he asked, "What now? We can't return because we didn't kill the sniper and yet we didn't let him continue killing unchecked. We can't receive any reward from either side."

"I know."

The woman smiled gracefully and started the engine.

"Since we already have the down payment from both parties, let's just disappear with it."

"……"

The man was about to say something, but the woman ignored him and stepped hard on the gas.

The moment the car jerked forward, a bullet came flying toward them, splitting a tree where the car had been just seconds ago.

To this day, the forest still remains and the sniper still waits on the hilltop.

“In the Middle of the Desert · b” — Beginner’s Luck · b —

It was raining. Water pounded the earth without pause . Nothing could be seen in the landscape except for the raindrops and the mist created by the rain. The fierce sound of water pouring onto the earth never seems to cease. Although it was daytime, the sky had a dark, gloomy hue.

There was, amidst this downpour, a solitary standing figure. The person was young — around fifteen. Her long brown coat sheltered only her body from the rain. Her short black hair was completely soaked; bangs plastered to her forehead. From there, water ran down and trickled to her face. Her tongue caught the drops that reached her mouth.

“It is so unlikely for such heavy rain to fall in a place like this. How strange…,” someone spoke to her. The voice sounded like that of a young boy, but its owner was nowhere to be seen.

The brown-clad figure casually raised her head to stare at the sky. Rain beat down mercilessly upon the girl’s face and fell from her eyes like tears.

"Aha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha!"

Then all of a sudden, she laughed. Head still raised, she opened her mouth wide and reached out to the sky with both arms.

"Aha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha!"

She continued to laugh gleefully, skipping and twirling her body around. The hem of her coat fluttered in the air like a gown.

"Aha ha! Aha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha !"

She danced and laughed maniacally for a while, then turned to a particular spot shrouded in mist.

"So what do you think?"

As the question went unacknowledged, she asked once more.

"What do you think, Hermes?"

This time there was a reply. "There's nothing all that great about it…"

“Nothing?”

After hearing the previous words repeated, there came an unenthusiastic response, “I don’t find this amusing at all, but right now I’m having mixed emotions.”

“Aha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha ha——”

The girl raised her head again in unrestrained laughter .

The voice asked, “Kino, what do you plan to do next?”

“I don’t know. What to do? Why bother worrying?”

After the girl named Kino had replied, she began to laugh once more.

This rainstorm, perhaps, will continue for a while.

“A Tale of Feeding Off Others”[1] —I Want to Live.—

Chapter One

"A Tale of Feeding Off Others"

— I Want to Live. —

It was inside a forest of snow.

The snow accumulated in one winter crushed all of the grass underneath. Only the tall trees with long and narrow leaves grew out of the white surface.

Even now, snow was still falling from the sky that was visible from the gaps in the branches. The dull low clouds were spread out and the light of the sun was weak.

It was a quiet place. Nothing could be heard other than the sound of the occasional snow pattering from the branches. The wind was not blowing either.

In such a place, there was a wild rabbit. Its fur was pure white except for the tips of its ears.

The rabbit advanced a little, leaving shallow footprints on the snow. It stopped and moved its ears and head bit by bit. And then it leaped forward again.

The rabbit repeated this for a while, then stopped. Its ears moved. A red dot appeared on its white head — a red light.

—

Inside the same forest was a human.

This person was clad in a hooded snowsuit and overpants that covered up to the tip of her shoes. She was wearing a furred hat and yellow single-lens goggles. A face warmer extended from her neck up, covering her face.

She was leaning against the trunk of a tree, sitting with legs bent and knees forward. With both hands, she was balancing a hand persuader (Note: A gun. In this case, a pistol) placed between her knees. The persuader was a slender automatic fitted with a harmonica-shaped silencer. A red light extended from the tiny hole under the barrel — a laser sight for alignment with the target. This light was aiming towards the head of the rabbit.

She breathed out a wisp of white air. She slowly pressed the trigger. A clink was heard from inside the persuader.

The next instant, blood spurted out of the place where the red point of light marked the rabbit's head.

The rabbit trembled for a moment, and soon fell down and stopped moving. The blood from its head slightly stained its white fur, and the snow underneath it melted a little.

—

Inside the forest was one road. The road was perfectly straight, cutting its way through the trees. It was covered with hardened, pure white snow.

On top of this road was a parked motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). Its back seat was converted into a sturdy carrier. However, there was no luggage on top; only a bag was tied to it.

The motorrad was customized to be able to run on snow. Around both tires, there were studs to pierce through the frozen road. On the frame in front of the engine, arms resembling a bicycle's training wheels were

sticking out on both sides. On the tips of these arms were planks for the feet to be placed in, at the bottom of which were tiny skis. This was to prevent the motorrad from falling down in case the tires slid.

"I caught one, Hermes." The human greeted the motorrad as she appeared from inside the forest. The rabbit, with its legs tied together, was dangling upside down from her hands. A covered holster was attached obliquely in front of her stomach.

The motorrad called Hermes replied cheerfully, "Good job! With this, you don't have to lessen your supply of portable rations, Kino."

The human called Kino nodded, put the rabbit inside the bag, and secured it onto Hermes' carrier.

Kino took off her goggles and bandanna and lowered down her face warmer. It was a person around mid-teens , with short black hair, big eyes, and a face carrying an intrepid expression. She lightly wiped off the sweat on her face and fixed her hat. Then she spoke,

"Now, let's hurry back. If those guys die, I'll be in a bind."

"In a bind?" Hermes asked.

"What I mean is, I would lose face."

"To whom?" Hermes asked once more.

"The rabbit," Kino answered.

Kino turned on Hermes' engine. The sound of the engine broke the stillness of the forest. Kino fixed her goggles and face warmer on, placed both of her feet on the support skis, and launched Hermes off.

In one corner of the white road was a relatively new kind of truck. The tires and lower half of its body was completely buried in the snow, rendering it immobile. Snow has accumulated heavily on its roof.

And a bit ways off the truck, on the border between the forest and the road, there was a big tent. Only the place where the dome-shaped tent stood was below the surface, as if the snow there caved in.

Eventually, the sound of an engine was heard, followed right after with the arrival of Kino and Hermes.

One man crawled out and peeked from inside the tent. The face of the man, who seemed to be about thirty, looked like it couldn't be any thinner. His beard and hair had grown as much as it could, and the winter clothes he was wearing was dirty all over.

Kino took out the rabbit from the bag and showed it to the man. The man looked up at it with a delighted face, and put his head back inside the tent. Then two other men stuck their heads out — a man wearing eyeglasses who seemed to be in his twenties and a man in his forties who had greying hair. Both looked pitifully thin, but smiled from ear to ear when they saw the rabbit.

"I'll cook it for you. Let me borrow a pot," Kino said.

"It's good enough! We'll eat it raw!" The man in his thirties said, his face wrought with impatience.

The other men pleaded to let them eat it right away, but Kino shook her head.

“That won’t do. It would be terrible if you get infected with Tularemia[2] or something.”

A look of disappointment loomed over the men, but they obediently took out two pots of different sizes from the tent. Kino took the pots and told them,

“I’ll call you when it’s done, so please rest until then.”

“Yes, we understand…. Miss Kino…” The man in his thirties called out to Kino who had already turned around.

“What is it?”

The man gazed straight into Kino’s eyes.

“Thanks.”

Kino smiled lightly. “It’s still too early for that, but… you’re welcome.”

The morning before.

Kino and Hermes were riding on the frozen road, thick clouds overhead.

Thanks to the studded tires and support skis, they were able to ride at a considerable speed.

Other than the bag, Hermes' rear carrier was loaded with a winter tent, a sleeping bag, and lots of traveling luggage.

Then Hermes spoke all of a sudden, "There's a truck up ahead."

Kino slowly loosened the accelerator. She rode using the momentum, and without using the brakes, she slowly stopped in front of the truck buried in the snow. She cut the engine, climbed off Hermes, and let down her goggles and face warmer.

Kino opened the cover of the holster in front of her stomach and took out the persuader inside with her right hand. It was the revolver-type she called 'Canon'.

As Kino approached the truck, she soon noticed the tent near it. Then she met the gaze of a man who hurriedly poked his head out of the tent's opening.

The bearded man in his thirties looked at Kino with a surprised face. Kino returned Canon in its holster, but did not let go of its grip as she greeted the man with a ' hello'.

Without answering Kino, the man crawled out of the tent and stood up feebly. From the tent, two other men peeked out with equally surprised expressions.

The man looked at Kino and Hermes, and asked with a weak voice, "Y-you travel with that motorrad, don't you …? C-can you spare us some food…?"

While looking at their pitiful state, Hermes spoke nonchalantly. "I see. I think I understand what your circumstances are."

"I'm sorry, but I have none. Since when were you here ?" Kino said.

"Don't be surprised…. We've been here since the beginning of winter."

Kino's face faintly gave away a look of surprise, while Hermes spoke. "I am *very* surprised."

"Yeah. Snow fell earlier than we expected. Soon it turned into a furious snowstorm, and we were passed up here ever since…"

"It's a good thing you didn't pass away," Hermes said, but nobody laughed.[3]

"And I suppose there's no food in that truck, either," Kino asked to confirm, and the men replied in anguish,

"There was food, but we have eaten everything already… that was a long time ago. Of course, we had plenty, but we didn't expect that we will be held up like this. We were careless. Since then, we've been waiting for someone to pass here. We beg you! Please share us something, anything we could eat…. There're three of us …"

The man pointed to the tent, and the two men looked at Kino with a clinging expression.

"We beg you…"

The man curled his fists together and appealed to Kino . Kino breathed lightly before she replied. "I do have portable rations. But I have to leave enough for myself. The reserves I have would be barely enough for three."

The men gulped as they listened to Kino.

"However," Kino continued. The men raised their faces.

"I can hunt something for you. I'm sure there are animals around this area, and since it's starting to get warmer, I would be able catch one somehow. If you regain enough strength, you might be able to move your truck. You still have fuel, don't you?"

"Yes, there's still some left! Then that means…?" The man happily asked Kino in return. Kino felt the men's warm, expectant gazes, and lightly nodded.

"Yes. I'll accompany you for a few days."

Broad smiles appeared on their faces upon hearing Kino's words. They thanked her in chorus.

"Your name is?" the man in his thirties asked.

"Kino. This here is Hermes."

"Miss Kino, eh? Here, take a look at this."

While saying so, the man took out a small box from his pocket. He opened it and showed it to Kino. Inside was a ring. It was a silver ring set with several small green gems.

"I believe this has a bit of value. It's our appreciation for your help. Please take it."

"It's still too early to thank me."

"That's fine. Take it. I wanted to take this back home for my wife, but it would be pointless if I die here."

"……"

Kino took the box in her hands and looked at it. She gazed at it for a while without any discernable change in her expression.

"I understand. I'll take this as a reward after everything is over. Until that time, I'll hold on to it."

Kino put the box in her pocket and instructed the men. "Please wait here for a while. I'll catch some game. I'll leave my luggage here, so please watch it for me until I return. Just so you know, meat is more delicious than my portable rations."

Kino removed all of her luggage from Hermes and tied up just one bag on the carrier.

And then she went out to hunt.

—

Kino started to cook.

She dug up the snow beside a tree until the ground became visible. Here she put together solid fuel, old newspapers and some twigs, and set it on fire. She suspended the pot to the tree with a rope and adjusted it

so that it would be on top of the flame. Then she put some clean snow inside.

Kino placed the rabbit on top of the iron plate she normally used for her shooting practice. She looked at the motionless rabbit for a moment, and then closed her eyes for a few seconds more.

After a simple silent prayer, she began to cut it apart.

Kino removed the gloves she wore in favor of thin rubber gloves, which she used to cover up to the sleeves of her winter suit.

Then she took out a folding hunting knife and made cuts around the fur near the center of the rabbit's abdomen using it.

After this, she pulled the fur sideways with both hands . She continued to pull until the neck and the tips of the feet were bare, then cut off the rabbit's hide from the rest of its body.

The rabbit, a size smaller than before, has turned into a pink mass of flesh.

Kino cut open the abdomen of the rabbit from the throat down to the anal area and took out its internal organs. She wiped the hollow interior of the wide-open belly using some snow and paper, and lightly drained the water.

To remove the limbs, Kino made cuts around the region where they were connected with the body, broke the hip joints, and severed the hind legs with the knees. Then she chopped the torso into appropriate sizes.

After she finished cutting it up, the rabbit has become ' meat' that could normally be sold in shops.

Kino adjusted the bonfire and scooped out the scraps from the water in the pot.

Then she put the meat into the pot. Using snow, she wiped the iron plate she used in place of a chopping board, and hoisted it above the fire to sterilize it. For the first time, Kino removed her rubber gloves.

The meat was ready after a while.

The men were called out by Kino, and with their plates and cups in hand, they wobbled out of the tent towards the fire. Their eyes that looked big in their gaunt faces had a bizarre glint in them.

Kino sprinkled the meat with salt and pepper and divided it among the men. The men gazed at the food in front of them in silence for a while. Soon, tears trickled down their dirty cheeks.

"Damn. This better not be a dream…"

"You'll find out once you eat it. It's not supposed to disappear… maybe," Kino said.

The men broke the meat into small pieces with their fingers and slowly carried it to their mouths. They chewed several times before gulping it down, then closed their eyes and inhaled deeply.

"It's so good…" The man in his forties muttered in between his broken sobs.

"Delicious…" The man in his twenties said as his tears trickled down silently, his hands working on the food slowly but incessantly.

The last man's eyes remained closed as he chewed on the meat for a while longer, as if confirming that it was real, and swallowed. "Yeah. It's really delicious. It has been such a long time since we last tasted something this good…. It's a bit salty though."

The men laughed as they wept. They rubbed their teary faces with their hands, and the dirt on their faces was washed off, if only a little.

Kino made some tea with the hot water in the other pot, and filled the men's cups. She handed the men some tablets.

"Those are vitamin tablets. They're my spares."

"Thanks. It's a full course meal."

"Kino, are you fine with us eating all the meat?" the man in his twenties asked.

"I thought there would be more than enough for everybody, but in your condition, it seems like you could

finish everything. I'm fine with the usual stuff I have," Kino said, showing them the square, clay-like portable rations.

"Thank you." "Thanks." The men meekly expressed their gratitude.

"If you can, please thank that guy over there too." Kino pointed to the tree.

On the branch of the tree were the fur and pieces of the upper and lower body of the rabbit. The four looked at the dark, round eyes that has lost its light.

Then, the men put down their plates and cups on top of the snow, clasped their hands together in front of their faces, and closed their eyes.

Kino, and Hermes who was parked behind her, looked at the men as they softly expressed their gratitude to their God.

"God, thank you. For us, the blood of another being was sacrificed…. And God, please forgive us for having to kill others to survive…"

The prayer of the men continued for a while, and Kino looked at them while eating the unappetizing portable rations.

Afterwards the men took their time in finishing all of the meat.

—

As the day came to a close, the sky, which was not too bright in the first place, became even darker. The scenery changed into a gray hue that quietly grew thicker.

Kino spread out her one-person tent on the opposite side of the men's tent, interposed with the truck.

She made some tea for the men by the end of the day. They thanked her once more, and returned to their own tent.

Kino covered Hermes' engine and tank, and slipped into her own tent.

—

The next morning.

The surroundings were still dark when Kino woke up. As usual, the sky was covered with clouds, and powdery snow fluttered about.

Kino exercised on top of the snow and practiced drawing out Canon several times.

After eating her portable rations alone, she tapped Hermes awake, turned on his engine, and strapped her bag on his carrier.

She asked the men who were stirred awake with the engine's roar to bring their cups. She put some snow in the cups and placed them on Hermes' engine and exhaust pipe. The snow soon melted.

"My engine was not made to make hot water, you know."

"Then that means you can be useful to me in many ways, Hermes."

—

That day.

Once again, Kino and Hermes went out to hunt. She brought down two big rabbits in a row.

Upon returning, she cut them apart like she did the day before. She cooked the first one in the afternoon in the same manner.

The men came out of the tent, and once again, gave thanks after their meal. And then, they returned to their tents and rested.

Kino cut down a branch of the tree for kindling, and cooked the other piece of meat as evening neared.

The men ate everything. The neatly gnawed bones piled up beside the bonfire.

While eating, the men told Kino about their country, and with smiles on their faces,

"In case you come to visit, we'll treat you to anything, you'd get twice as heavy!" they promised Kino.

As they regained their body strength, they were eventually able to walk normally without staggering.

—

By nightfall, the snow has completely stopped falling and rifts manifested on the clouds little by little. The stars became visible in the sky one by one.

Kino was inside her sleeping bag in her tent. Hermes, who was parked right in front of the tent, spoke. "Kino, are you awake?"

"Yeah."

"Is it really okay for you to go out of your way like this ?"

"It's not. Even though it's getting somewhat warmer, I want to get out of this forest as soon as possible."

"Then why?"

"Because there's the reward. I accepted the ring."

"What's so great about that thing?" Hermes said.

For a while, there was a rummaging sound from inside the tent. And then, Kino gently slipped her left hand under the hem. The ring was inserted on her middle finger.

"What do you think?" Kino asked, turning her hand over.

"It doesn't suit you," Hermes replied immediately. She slowly drew back her hand.

"…I think so too. It would be on the way when I grip your clutch. But it must be worth something if I sell it. Besides, it's not a bad thing to do an act of mercy from time to time," she answered back.

"Whatever," was Hermes' only reply.

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino met the men.

The sky was tinged a light blue when she woke up. It was absolutely clear, and devoid of clouds.

The orange lump of light began to rise behind Kino as she performed her morning exercises. Her shadow became longer and extended on top of the snow.

Soon, the men woke up. They tried to walk steadily and prepared hot water on their own.

"I see you're doing much better now," Kino said, and the men nodded.

"Yeah, thanks."

For breakfast, Kino divided her portable rations among themselves. The four ate their meal rather uncomfortably.

During their after-meal tea, the men talked merrily about their home country.

"Those folks will surely be surprised once we get home. None of them would think that we would get stranded like this. I'm sure they believed that we were shot dead."

"They probably made graves for us already."

"Isn't that funny? We could visit our own graves."

When the man in his thirties asked Kino about her home country, Kino only answered with a shake of her head.

"I see… sorry about that," the man said, and brought the discussion to a close.

—

As the sun went up, the air slowly but steadily became warmer.

The men talked to Kino about moving their truck. If they divide work and dig up the snow around the truck to create a slope, they could possibly get out the truck from its current condition of being buried. As long as the truck was still in running condition, they could get to the nearest country.

The man in his thirties asked Kino, "First, we want to remove our luggage from the vehicle. It would be nice if you can help."

Kino and the men turned to the back of the truck.

The truck's loading platform had three locks. The man in his thirties asked for the keys of the other two, opened the door and went inside. After a while, they heard some clicking sounds, and the man in his forties separated Kino a bit and talked to her.

"Miss Kino, will that motorrad be fine?"

Kino, who did not understand what he meant, turned around. At the same time, the man in his thirties quickly got out of the truck's platform. He was holding a long persuader with both hands and aiming it towards Kino.

The moment Kino saw the man's persuader, she reached for her holster with her right hand, but stopped herself from pulling Canon out. She calmly faced the persuader pointed at her.

"Good decision. If you pulled out that persuader, I would have shot you without a moment's delay," the man said as he climbed down the platform. There was no opening in his stance.

"Well, thanks for that," Kino said with her usual tone without any hint of surprise. The other two men backed off from Kino a few steps, their faces now stern.

The man in his thirties spoke. "The truth is I wouldn't have fired at you. We take *pride* in delivering our important goods without a single scratch, you see."

"Goods?" Kino asked, and the man in his forties answered.

"Yeah. We work for an employment agency. What we refer to as 'goods' are people."

Hermes, who was parked a bit ways off behind Kino, spoke in a tone not different from usual. "Oh, so you guys are kidnappers. Or to be more specific, slave traders ."

"You don't have to put it so bluntly… but well, that's correct. Now that we are strong enough to move, we have to do our real job. So Miss Kino, we will take you with us to a place where someone would buy you. Don't put up any resistance now."

"Well that's that, but I'm a little concerned," Hermes said.

"Don't worry, Hermes. Your partner is quite a beauty. She'll shine with a bit of polishing, and because she's young, she'll definitely be sold for a high price. We always adorn our goods with jewels and pretty clothes; it 's a complete package. We're not going to give her any injuries," the man in his forties assured.

"Anyway, you sure make it sound easy," Kino replied indifferently, her body not moving an inch.

While gazing into Kino's eyes, the man in his thirties spoke with his persuader still aimed at her. "Please don't

think badly of us. We are truly grateful to you for saving us. It was great… really great. However, you can say that we are wolves. And wolves have no choice but to live like wolves. This is in order for us to survive, you see."

"I see." Kino slowly raised her hands.

"Okay. Now, remove that revolver in front of your stomach. Slowly, with your left hand."

Kino slowly removed Canon's holster from her belt with her left hand.

"Throw it away."

Kino tossed it, and it fell between her and the men. There was a thud, and it was stuck halfway into the snow .

The man in his twenties went to pick it up, but the man in his forties beside him stopped him and spoke. " Remove your winter suit. Slowly. One hand at a time, and throw it up front."

Kino removed her winter suit as she was told. Underneath, she was wearing a black jacket fastened with a wide belt on the waist. There were several pouches attached on the belt.

"Face to the back. Slowly now."

Kino turned around. Lightly inserted on her belt was the holstered persuader she used to shoot down the rabbits. Kino called this one 'Woodsman'.

"I knew it. Pull that persuader out slowly with your right hand. Then throw it. Slowly, remember."

"I'm impressed you knew," Kino said while looking at Hermes. With her right hand, she gripped Woodsman's barrel, removed it from its holster and tossed it away.

"Face here, hands up. Slowly."

Kino raised both hands and slowly faced the men.

Two of them tried to approach Kino, but this time, the man in his twenties stopped them.

"Wait. You have a knife, right? Where is it?"

Kino with a somewhat dejected look, replied bluntly. " I have them all over."

"Throw them all away."

Kino slowly put her right hand in the pocket at her jacket's hem. She took out the folding knife she used for cooking and flung it away.

Kino slowly reached out for the pouches on her belt with her right hand. From there, she pulled out the grip of a knife, flicked open the folding blade, locking it automatically. She threw this away.

Kino slowly put her right hand inside the left cuff of her jacket and extracted a double-edged knife. She tossed it. And then, she put her left hand inside the right cuff and took out a similar knife, and threw it away.

"……"

The men silently looked on. Kino slowly began to take off her overpants. She zipped down the fastener on her side and removed it one leg at a time. The boots and pants she was wearing underneath could now be seen.

Kino slowly squatted down and took out a thin knife from a sheath tied up on the shin part of her boots. She threw it away. She removed a similar knife from her left leg with her left hand, and tossed it.

The knife fell down and hit the other knives on the ground, making a clinking sound.

"Are you… a knife merchant?" the man in his thirties muttered impulsively.

Kino slowly reached at the belt behind her right waist with her right hand, and pulled out a sheathed knife. It was a knife with a double-edged blade around fifteen centimeters in length, and a fat, cylindrical grip.

Kino gripped it with her right hand, and held the blade part with her left.

She spoke slowly, looking at the eyes of the man holding the persuader. "This one's the last."

"Throw it away," said the man in his thirties. A red dot appeared on his forehead — a red light.

Bang bang bang!

There were three gunshots in succession. Between the blade and the grip of the knife were four small holes, from three of which, bullets flied out.

Blood spurted out of the place where the red point of light marked the man's forehead.

At the same moment as the shots were heard, the man in his forties saw Kino advancing towards him, and flailed his left hand. Kino passed underneath and restrained the man's left hand from behind with her left. She stabbed all of the knife's length through the left side of his back.

"Guh—!"

At the same time as the man let out this sound, the man that had three holes opened in his forehead collapsed.

Kino then pushed forward the knife and the man towards the man in his twenties.

As the thin man fell over, Kino retrieved Canon from the snow.

Kino immediately raised the hammer and stood in front of the man, pinned on his back underneath the corpse.

"Aaaah—!"

The man shrieked. Kino took a short glance towards the other man whose face was stained red with blood. And then she pointed Canon towards the last man.

"Save m——"

There was a thunderous roar and a white smoke as Kino's right hand bounded up. Several of the man's teeth burst flying like popcorn.

The man's head leaped as if it was hit by an electric shock, and then became still. Blood pooled from inside his mouth, and at once, the air pushed out of the lungs bubbled out. The blood overflowed, melting the snow beneath the man's neck little by little.

Kino stood in front of the three men's corpses. There was a faint steam rising up from the blood.

"That was a close call," Hermes said to Kino from behind. "Are you hurt?"

"Nope," was Kino's only reply. And then she added, " That was scary. I thought it was the end for me."

Kino stood for a while, holding Canon in her right hand.

In the middle of the clear blue sky and the glittering snowscape, the sound of Kino's molars grinding in fear resounded.

—

"Are you fine now?" Hermes asked.

"I'm okay now," Kino nodded. Steam no longer came out from the corpses.

Kino stood in front of the truck's loading platform.

While holding Canon cautiously, she slowly opened the door.

"I see," Kino muttered, and looked for a while inside the truck. And then, she opened both doors. Light shined inside the truck.

A number of white bones rolled off from the narrow interior of the truck.

Human bones. Thin ribs. Small finger bones. Broken pelvic bones shaped like spatula. Broken thighbones — the marrow inside thoroughly slurped.

Several used up containers of solid fuel rolled off. An iron plate was torn off from one part of the truck. Above it, there were several charred pieces of a backbone.

In one corner of the truck was the head of the person who owned these bones.

Long blonde hair was tied on the truck's pipe, from which the head was suspended, lightly facing downwards. It was a young girl, perhaps about the same age as Kino.

The eyes and the nose were gone. There were only the silently gaping black holes, the whittled skin and flesh of the cheeks and jaws, and the exposed part of the skull

underneath the face. The lower jaw was barely connected to the rest of the head.

A hole as big as a person's fist was gaping wide on the forehead. All of the brain was gone.

Hung neatly in one corner opposite the head was a bright yellow dress.

"…Hermes, can you see it?" Kino asked.

"Yup. Food scraps," Hermes answered.

Kino looked at the corpses of the men by her feet.

"Before that, this was their important 'goods' eh…"

"And before that?" Hermes caught Kino's mumbled words, and asked.

Kino spoke gently while looking at the glittering blonde hair.

"I don't know."

As Kino slowly closed the door, she spoke to the girl.

"It's not right. But, they didn't want to die."

—

"We've been held up so much. Let's leave as soon as possible," Kino said, picking up all of the knives she tossed earlier.

Snow accumulated inside the barrel of Woodsman. Kino picked it up and without aiming at anything in particular, fired two shots. And then she closed the safety and returned it behind her waist.

She took the knife piercing the back of the man with one forceful pull. She thrust the bloodied blade in the snow back and forth until it was clean. And then she wiped it with the clothes of the dead man.

Kino opened the screwed lid at the bottom of the knife's grip. She took out three small, empty cartridges from inside. Then she took out Woodsman's spare bullets from her belt, and put them inside the knife's grip.

And then she returned this persuader-knife to its sheath in her right waist.

Kino put on her overpants and winter suit. And then she returned Canon to its original place.

She quickly packed her tent and loaded all her luggage on Hermes. Then she started the engine.

Suddenly, Kino returned to the side of the truck. She squatted beside the corpse holding the persuader.

She removed the glove in her left hand. A ring was inserted in her middle finger. It was a silver ring, with several small green gems attached to it.

Kino looked at her left hand for a few seconds.

Kino removed the ring and took out the box from her pocket. She put it inside the man's breast pocket. And then she spoke to him softly.

"I'm returning this to you… because I wasn't able to save you in the end."

Then Hermes spoke with a voice as soft as Kino's,

"What? I thought you liked that thing?"

—

Kino straddled Hermes. She covered her face with her hat and goggles.

Kino lightly revved the accelerator, and the engine roared in excellent condition.

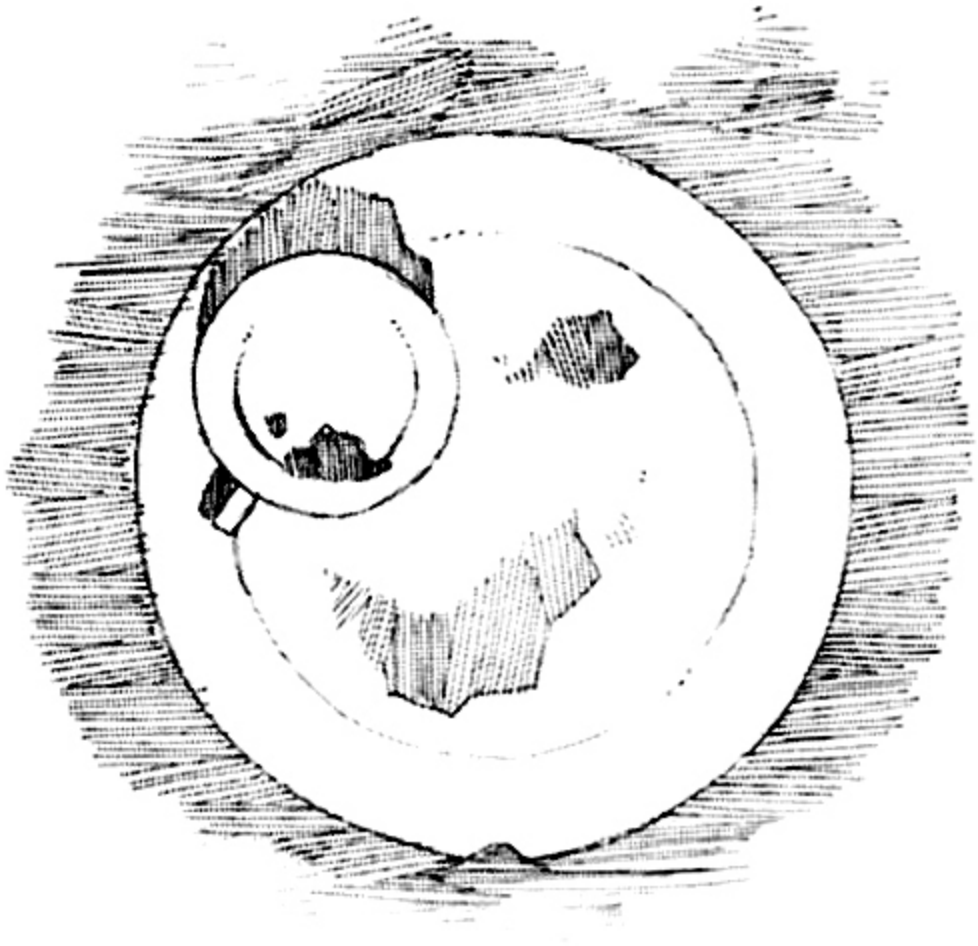
"Shall we go?" Hermes proposed.

"Yeah."

Kino turned her head back lightly to check whether she left anything. And then she looked at the remains of the three rabbits lined up on the branch of the tree.

"Please don't think badly of us. We're only humans, after all."

The motorrad ran off. It passed through the truck, the tent, and what remained of the four corpses, and soon disappeared.



“Overprotection” —Do You Need It?—

Chapter Two

"Overprotection"

— Do You Need It? —

It was the second day in the country.

While on her way to pick up Hermes at the car park after lunch, Kino encountered a bickering couple in front of the motorrad. They appeared to be a married couple in their thirties, and beside them stood a boy, about ten years old and looking more than a little lost.

The father spoke. "That's why I'm telling you —— you 're being over-protective!"

The mother retaliated. "No! You are being stubborn. This is for his own good!"

The three were blocking her way to Hermes.

Kino began by clearing her throat, "Ahem!"

Before she could manage to say "Excuse me, may I pass through and get to my motorrad behind you?" the father noticed her and asked,

"What do you think?"

"About what? I didn't hear the conversation…" Kino cocked an eyebrow, amused by the sudden question. But

before the father could explain himself, the mother interjected,

“This stubborn man insists that our boy doesn’t need a bulletproof vest.”

“Why would he need something like that?” asked Kino.

“The war, of course! Our son is joining the army,” replied the father.

“War?”

“Yes, it broke out a few months back. It is the first one we’ve had since the country was founded. The army has been recruiting soldiers for the front lines. My son will be joining the army today. Not to boast, but he will make a fine soldier, probably will return a hero too! But this foolish wife of mine keeps insisting that he wears a bulletproof vest. What nonsense.”

“Honey, the vest will protect our son from shrapnel!”

“He just needs to crouch down to avoid that, not to mention there are trenches to take cover in.”

"Even so, it will protect him from all sorts of things. He can't be a hero if he gets hurt; our son needs to be able to do his best to become a hero."

"But won't the vest be heavy? He can't move freely if he's bogged down. Soldiers should have the grace of a butterfly and the sting of a bee! Also his squad will ridicule him if he's the only one wearing one."

"All he needs to do is say it's a gift from his loving mother."

After listening to the parents, Kino glanced at the boy and said in a carefully neutral tone,

"Why don't you ask the boy's opinion?"

"Oh… you're right! What do you think, Timmy? You will listen to mommy, won't you?" The mother bent down to gently place her hands on his shoulders.

The father also squatted down next to him, and held up an encouraging fist. "Come on son! You are a man, right? Real men don't need this junk."

"Don't worry, mommy and daddy will respect your decision."

"That's right, boy!"

The boy answered with a quaver in his voice, "I… I don't wanna go to war!"

The father immediately stood up, and with a tone completely different from before, "We're doing this for your own good!"

The mother also stood up and stared down at her son. "You need to join the army and become a hero. That way you will be able to enter a good college and university, and then you will get to work for a large company. Don't you understand? We are doing this for you. Didn't you say that everyone in your class is joining? Do you want to lose to them? Is it okay with you to get left behind?"

"But… Johnny's parents won't let him go."

The mother began to raise her voice at her son. "What Johnny does is not our problem, you should decide for yourself!"

"That's right! You shouldn't compare yourself to others!"

The poor boy's face went pale with terror after this outburst from his parents.

The mother took out a brand new bulletproof vest from her bag. The small vest was still wrapped in plastic, with a card attached that read, "To our brave young soldiers! Specially designed to reduce stress on the shoulders. Now with adjustable height to suit growing children. Ideal for long term use."

She half-squatted and placed one hand behind her son, gently urging him. "Put this one on and let's go to the recruitment center. Don't be scared. Mommy will be with you."

"See? Like I said, you are being over-protective."

"I just want the best for our son!"

"I know. Just stop overdoing it."

And so the bickering began anew. In the midst of it, the boy timidly said again, "I don't wanna go."

"Not again! You must have inherited that cowardice from your mother's side."

"What?! Ooooh! He's as stubborn as you are, you old mule!"

Again the boy protested, now almost crying, "I… really… don't want to go!"

Kino interjected, her voice still carefully controlled,

"Maybe you should rethink this, with the boy."

The parents gave Kino a horrified and insulted look.

"Why don't you mind your own business? This is a family matter."

"Yeah, this is our problem! We really are doing this for our child."

"Right," Kino nodded. "I'll do that."

"Come on." The mother grabbed the boy's hand and began to drag him away. "We should head to the recruitment center before it's too late. We'll decide about the vest once we get there."

"Let's go, Timmy."

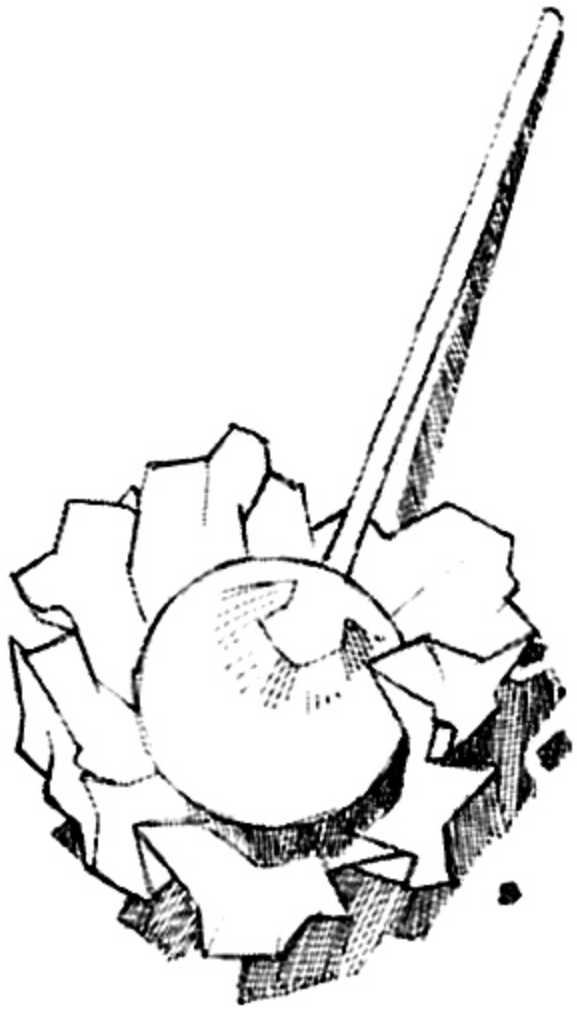
Kino watched as the parents dragged their son away.

She shook her head, and then turned back towards Hermes. The motorrad greeted Kino as she kicked up the stand.

“Must have been tough.”

Kino answered honestly before hopping onto Hermes.

“Yeah. It was.”



“Land of Wizards”[4] —Potentials of Magic—

Chapter Three

"Land of Wizards"

— Potentials of Magic —

Amidst a sultry marshland was a lone road.

This flat land was mottled with stagnant pools of water that was blanketed with water-dwelling vegetation . The road twisted and turned as it traced a path around the swamps.

The road made of reddish-brown earth was wide, but its edges have been completely decayed by rainfall. Not even its center was spared from dampness. It seemed to have melded with its surroundings due to the intense heat and humidity.

The brightly-feathered waterfowl creating a clamor in the swamps with their choking caws suddenly took flight all at once. A lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) emerged, making its way through the slushy road.

It was a motorrad which, instead of a back seat, had a carrier loaded heavily with traveling luggage. The raucous roar of its engine reverberated freely.

Its rider donned a black vest on top of a shirt, lapels undone. A wide belt was fastened around her waist. She wore a brimmed hat on top of her black hair, and had

goggles strapped over her eyes. The face beneath it was young, around mid-teens.

A hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun, in this case, a pistol) was installed inside a holster over her right thigh. It was a single-action revolver, which means that its hammer has to be raised every time it is fired.

The rider drove the motorrad prudently, yet thick mud would occasionally accumulate inside the front wheels, making her lose balance. At times, she would have to make the rear wheel spin madly, hurling sludge all over, just to escape from a muddy rut.

"I've said this many times over… this is such a bad road." The motorrad spoke to its rider.

"Yeah. I wonder if this would take us longer than expected. Here goes…" The rider answered as she hoisted up the motorrad that slipped on its rear wheel once more. Beads of sweat formed on her cheeks.

"But you know, Kino," the motorrad initiated after running for a while.

"What?" the rider called Kino replied.

"After suffering this much, it would be a *real* waste if the country we're heading to is a bore."

"That's true, but like we're told before, 'There is always something worth seeing in any country, one way or the other.'"

"I wonder if that's true."

Kino loosened the gaze beneath the goggles.

"But if that's the case, then it wouldn't really matter where we go…. Hermes, since it's not yet too late, how about we change our route?" Kino suggested. She stopped the motorrad called Hermes on a relatively dry part of the road. "What should we do? Anywhere's fine. There's also a road just a bit to the south. There should also be a country over there."

Hermes considered the proposition for a while before he replied,

"It's nice asking my opinion for once, but it's your call."

"All right… Then let's continue this way."

"Okay. But why?"

"Just a hunch. It's not like there's anyone waiting for me, or there's anyone who needs me badly in some country. I just thought it would be troublesome to go back. Besides, there's no assurance that the other road will be better than this one."

"That's it?"

Kino launched Hermes, and pressed forward, cutting through the mud. They ran as slowly as ever.

Kino complained teasingly. "It would be great if you could run over water, Hermes. That way we could cross the swamps and run in a straight line."

"That's absurd. Motorrads can't run over water." Hermes spoke with utmost seriousness that Kino had to ask,

"Wanna try?"

"No need, I already know. There are many things motorrads can't do. We're different from humans."

"What, I can't walk on water either."

Hermes immediately countered, "But you can build a boat and ride it… because you're human."

"I see…. But,"

"But?"

"I can't do it after all. I may have grown fond of traveling on you, Hermes," Kino answered after a pause.

"Ah! You just told me something nice! Let's go faster!"

"Okay!"

And so Kino and Hermes proceeded with much enthusiasm.

But soon after, the rear wheel got stuck in a deep mud, rendering the motorrad immobile once more.

"Ah!" "Ah!"

"Welcome, traveler! Welcome to our country! It has been a long time since we've had a guest. This is really fortunate! Did you have any trouble on the way here?"

The soldier who stood eagerly in front of the towering walls and gigantic gates beamed at the rider coming with her motorrad.

"Not really."

Kino took off her hat and goggles and replied with poise despite her legs being caked with mud from sole to knee, and her gloves and shirt sleeves in no better state. There were even tiny splotches of dried mud on her face. Meanwhile, both of Hermes' wheels have been dyed brown, and the clods of mud that clung onto his engine were baked dry with the heat.

"That's great!" the guard said with a smile.

Kino and Hermes passed the gates as soon as they finished the entry procedures.

Before the gates was an elliptical plaza. Just a bit ways off was a row of wooden, one-storey houses crowded together. Every single one was elevated, with stout, wooden pillars that pierced the ground. The narrow road was entirely paved, a step higher than the ground itself.

There were several men in the park. They approached with smiles, perhaps in anticipation of Kino and Hermes.

"Good afternoon, traveler. Welcome to our country. I am the person who was given charge of this country's affairs."

Kino took off her hat and gave a slight bow to the middle-aged man who introduced himself as the chief.

"Good afternoon. I am Kino, and this is my partner, Hermes."

"It's really wonderful of you to come. You are the first guest we've had in five years. There's no hotel in our country, so we'll have to accommodate you in our

country's reception hall. Of course, we won't ask for payment of any sort. You deserve no less, being our country's guest."

The chief then bowed deeply, and the other men followed suit.

Hermes voiced out a whistle. "Isn't that great, Kino? It's the first time you get to be treated like this. It's a good thing we chose this road – just how many times did we think of turning back? That road was so *horrible*; you couldn't blame anyone thinking that the country ahead's inhabi—"

Kino kicked Hermes in the middle of his dialogue, and bowed to the chief and his followers. "That's really kind of you. We're very grateful."

—

Kino and Hermes were guided to the reception hall.

Though it was called such, it was only a larger version of the stilt houses they saw earlier. When Kino inquired, she was told that this building was typically used for harvest festivals, concerts, and elections. Around it was the town hall, the chief's residence, the courthouse, and so on, but it was really hard to tell which one is which.

The only difference is that the road facing these buildings was more impressive. It was wide, and paved like a highway. More importantly, there were magnificent bronze statues standing at its center.

The chief introduced it as the country's one and only main road. And that the bronze statues on its center were of those leaders who have accomplished great deeds for the country.

Then, as if in a trance, he spoke fervently of how he was working hard to attain his lifetime dream of someday having his own statue that can watch over this road for eternity.

Kino borrowed a tap and thoroughly washed the mud off herself and Hermes. By the time she finished, the beautiful orange rays of the evening sun was already shining across the sky.

They were given a fine room. Kino placed Hermes in one corner and removed the luggage from him.

The chief eagerly invited Kino to that night's welcome party. But some sensible person suggested to push the event the next day, as the traveler must be tired.

Kino ate her dinner in the dining hall, took a longed-for shower, and went straight to sleep.

—

The morning of the next day.

As usual, Kino woke up at dawn.

She performed her exercises in the spacious room, then cleaned and practiced with 'Canon', the persuader on her right thigh.

Just when Kino finished her free breakfast, the chief came to invite her to a welcome tea party in his official residence.

"It will be boring. I'm sure of it," Hermes commented in a voice audible only to Kino.

"I know," Kino said with a nod. "But they lent us a room. We have to get along with them, you know, to return the favor."

"Hmph."

Kino and Hermes went out to the main road. The weather was good, but there was a strong, damp wind blowing. The chief explained, "During this season, there is a strong wind that blows only during the morning. But it will be calm for the rest of the day."

Kino drank tea together with the chief, his wife, and his followers in the lobby of the official residence.

At first, they were talking about Kino's travels, but after a while, the conversation turned into a solo recital of the chief, who rattled on about the greatness of their country.

Originally, this country was part of a swampy, uninhabitable region. But with the persistent efforts of their great ancestors, it turned into a fertile agricultural land. Though small, it was abundant in food. Everyone lived in harmony with each other, and the public order was good. Just as he said the day before, the chiefs who had achievements worthy of merit will have a bronze statue made for them.

"Well as for me, I haven't done much yet. It's embarrassing." Then the chief added confidently, "But since my appointment, the grain harvest has improved by three percent!"

While Kino interjected as appropriate during the chief's harangue, she noticed that Hermes had fallen asleep behind her.

Kino was invited for lunch in the official residence's dining hall. After the splendid meal, they went back to the lobby again, where tea has been prepared.

"Oh right! There's this story too…" the chief began. It was time for another long story.

—

“Chief! I have a request!”

Along with the high-pitched voice, the door slammed open and a woman in her late twenties came in. With her oil-stained overalls, she headed straight to the chief’s seat .

The people around tried to stop her, but wasn’t able to do anything. Without giving so much as a glance towards Kino and Hermes, she stood in front of the chief and took out a letter from her breast pocket.

With a look of exasperation, the chief read her letter. Soon his face stiffened, and he raised his voice,

“Absolutely not! How many times do I have to tell you before you understand?!”

The trespassing woman and the chief began to argue.

“Just two would do! And it’ll be only for that time!”

"Even if it's only one, I won't allow it! What do you take our great leaders for?!"

"Didn't you want to be merited for great achievements ? I can help you get a bronze statue for yourself, Chief."

"You can't grant it! Not with something out of a fantasy!"

"We won't know if we don't try!"

Kino drank her tea as she watched the two.

"We know even if we don't!"

"We won't!"

"Good grief, please come to your senses!"

"You're the one who ought to do that!"

"Enough!"

"I won't give up! Eh… wait! Let me go!"

Before the argument turned to insults, the woman was dragged out of the building.

The chief drew a deep breath and shook his head several times, then explained to Kino, "Ah, that was unsightly. But it was decided that the chief had to listen to the citizen's appeals no matter where or when."

"I see. Then, that person just now, what was she appealing about?"

"She was asking to take down the bronze statues. … Well please don't concern yourself over it, traveler…. More than that, let's return to our stories."

"Ah, I'd love to but," Kino slowly stood up and politely,

"I have learned a lot about your history. Thank you very much. Next, we would like to tour the country on our own. Is that all right?"

—

After finally being released, Kino and Hermes exited the chief's residence and rode among the pedestrians.

“You were asleep the whole time weren’t you, Hermes ,” Kino grumbled with a hint of envy.

“Yup, I had a good sleep. That racket woke me up, though.” Just as Hermes replied, Kino saw the woman before. She was on a bicycle, but she rode with the speed of a motorrad.

“It’s that person.” Kino overtook the woman and gave her a bow without stopping Hermes. The woman spoke to Kino as she rode her bicycle.

“You were that traveler earlier, right?”

“Yes,” Kino replied out loud.

“I’m sorry for causing such a ruckus.”

“I don’t mind. I was able to escape that place thanks to you.”

The woman snickered at Kino’s answer.

"By the way, why do you want to have the statues taken down?" Hermes asked. The woman looked at them for a while.

"Oh, about that… do you have time, traveler?"

"We have. As long as it's not another boastful speech about this country."

"You're a frank one, aren't you? Anyway, I'll show you something interesting. Come with me."

Then the woman swiftly turned into an alley. It was so sudden that Kino rode past it, and in a flurry, turned around and followed the woman.

As they neared the country's outskirts and the walls became more visible, the number of houses lessened and the view became increasingly dominated by fields and paddies. People doing farm work could be seen everywhere.

Without slowing down, the woman made a turn at a narrow and winding road, and stopped in front of a warehouse surrounded by fields. Nearby was a splendid manor and a crane truck.

The woman slipped off the upper half of her overalls and tucked it at the waist over her shirt. She poured tap water over her sweaty head and dried it with a towel. Then she faced Kino.

“Welcome to my house. I’m Nimya, Nimya Tchuhachkova. Nice to meet you.”

“Hello. I’m Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes.”

“Hi there.”

Nimya half-opened the door to the warehouse and invited Kino and Hermes inside.

The interior was dark, humid, and reeked of machine oil.

"Now I'll answer your question. I want to turn the main road into a long, straight path. That's why the bronze statues have to be moved," Nimya explained.

Still doubtful, Kino asked. "What for?"

"It's… for this."

At the same time, Nimya pressed a switch in her hand. The lights hanging from the ceiling slowly lit up, and ventilation fans also started to run.

There was a transport crane dangling from the ceiling. The floor was lined up with various construction machines, and one corner of the room was littered with a mountain of scrap metal. There were several desks cluttered with documents. There were also a number of bicycles hanging side-by-side in one corner.

And at the center of the warehouse was a silver machine.

Roughly the size of a truck, it had a body like that of a fish with its streamlined form and dorsal and tail fins. At its tail end was a device that looked like a three-bladed fan, and arranged symmetrically on its sides were two

panel-like protrusions, the span of which was longer than the machine's overall length. And below these protrusions were two legs that had tires at the end.

"What… is this thing?" Kino asked after trying to figure it out for a while.

"It doesn't have a name yet, but…" Nimya turned to Kino and Hermes. Then she declared with a bold yet beautiful smile, "With this… I will soar to the skies!"

Kino asked immediately, "You can fly with that? How ?"

Nimya nodded and quickly explained.

"If you hold a plank horizontally against the wind, nothing will happen, right? But if you place it at an angle , even if it's only a little, a force that moves the plank forward and upward is generated. The same idea is in effect when you raise your head while riding a bicycle, causing your hat to fly off. So using this concept, if you attach an angled plank to an object – it doesn't have to be a bicycle – and let it run at a particular speed, it will be lifted to the air by the plank. And that object should be able to fly."

After listening to her words, Kino only muttered, " How… nicely thought out."

"I guess. But I haven't had the chance to test out this machine yet. For it to fly, I need a long, flat, and perfectly straight road. No other place could meet those conditions inside or outside this country, except for that road. But those bronze statues are in the way. I'll do whatever it takes to have them moved!"

"Now I understand. But the chief is against it…. Does he think it's impossible?"

"Yes. And not just him. Everyone in this country thinks that it is not possible for humans to fly using a machine. No matter how many times I explain the theory to them, it's no use. That's why I wanted to show them proof!"

"Oh…"

Kino stared at the machine in its bare, metallic form, and observed a nine-cylinder engine installed in front of its body.

Meanwhile, Nimya prepared Kino some tea. As it was served to her, Kino asked, "It has an interesting scent. What kind of tea is it?"

"Hmm? It's tea brewed from the gall nut of a tree in this country. Oh, and it's very nutritious."

Afterwards Nimya sat on a desk, and offered Kino a chair. Then as if finally having gathered up her resolve, Nimya asked, "Hey, Hermes. Since you're a motorrad, do you know whether it will function just as I imagined it? Or won't it?"

Hermes answered right away. "I do. I've known the moment I heard your explanation. I don't mind answering, but before that, let me ask you the same question. What do you think? Do you honestly believe it will fly?"

"……!" Nimya was tongue-tied for a moment, then answered without hesitation, "It will fly! I can't be wrong ! It will fly!"

Nimya gripped her mug so hard that the tea slightly spilled. Kino sipped a mouthful from her own.

"Correct. Judging from its appearance, it can fly. You can also control it. The only thing you need is a long and level runway," Hermes said.

"I knew it!"

"Hmm…"

Kino only muttered as Nimya leaped in joy.

But Nimya's joy soon turned into a deep sigh, "A road, eh? But that's the toughest hurdle of all…"

At that moment, a car's engine was heard from outside followed by a violent rapping at the entrance.

"Nimya Tchuhachkova. Please open the door. It's me."

It was the chief's voice. Nimya clicked her tongue and pressed the switch beside the desk. The warehouse shutters opened, allowing the sunlight to get in. Footsteps of more than ten people, led by the chief, came in.

"Good afternoon, Chief. For you to pay me a visit… could it be that my appeal was already approved?"

"Of course not. …Oh, traveler, how come you're here?"

"I invited her out for tea and told her my story. I'm just welcoming our honored guest, am I not allowed to do so?"

The chief made a sullen face, but finally calmed himself after some effort.

"Nimya. There is something I would like to tell you."

"And what would that be?"

"All citizens are free to do anything they want as long as they don't commit crimes or create trouble for the community. However, this country's council has decided that you shall no longer be allowed to waste time and money on this 'flying machine' and other worthless matters."

The chief delivered his speech with a dignified and deliberate tone. Nimya only glared back, though not impolitely, and gave a curt reply, "It's not 'worthless'. That's all I have to say."

Kino and Hermes could almost hear the molars of the chief grinding in frustration.

A middle-aged man spoke up. "Chief. It's no use no matter what you tell her. This woman has gone crazy. Just look at this *weird* machine."

"Don't you dare touch it!" Nimya gave a piercing shriek to the man who tried to approach the machine.

"Hah!" he jeered. "I'm not going to touch such a bizarre object."

The man peered at the machine from the front, and with a tone full of mockery, "Oh my. To use such a fine engine on a thing like this… You can see for yourselves, this is nothing but an enormous fan!"

"Exactly. In theory, it's the same as a fan."

"Ohh? So you're saying that if I use a fan in a particular way, it will fly! Care to tell this foolish old man the trick?"

Laughter erupted from the crowd. Nimya, unfazed by the taunt, began her explanation.

"The machine will be drawn forward by that."

"Drawn forward? By this fan?"

"Yes. The wind that it generates can produce the force to move it towards the opposite direction. When these ' wings' turn at a high speed and send wind towards the machine, it will move forward. It will run."

There was a two second gap before the man burst into laughter.

"Hahahahahaha! Isn't that amazing!"

"What's so funny?!"

"Hahaha. Come to think of it, I have used fans for years — haha — But not one *ever* moved from my desk! —ahaha— Isn't that funny?"

The man doubled up in laughter. Several people from the crowd also started to laugh.

"For it to work in the case of a normal fan, it needs to overcome friction with the desk! You should try it on a big flat, frozen surface, and you'll see how strong wind power is!" Nimya insisted.

The man continued as he wiped his tears from laughing too hard. "Okay—. Then, what sort of magic spell should you use to get this giant fan moving?"

Laughter resounded once more in the warehouse. Nimya muttered, "These ignorant geezers."

After some time, when the laughter has completely subsided, another man spoke to Nimya.

"Assuming that this thing does move… well, it does have tires. But you also claim that it could fly?"

"Yes. If it moves at a fast enough speed, it will be lifted by those wings," Nimya explained as she pointed to the panels at the sides.

"By wings, don't tell me you mean those flat protrusions from the sides?"

"Yes."

"How do I say this… there must be some mistake in the design," the man pointed out seriously, and Nimya promptly retorted.

"What did you say?!"

The man put on airs, and continued, "But see, if they're fixed on the body… there's no way they could flap."

Another round of laughter from the crowd. And another explanation from Nimya.

"They don't have to flap! As air flows from the front to back, a difference in the amount of air above and below the wings will develop. When that happens, there will be a force that will make it move upwards. I can show you my experiment!"

Nimya flicked the switch of the fan on the table.

A board placed perfectly in front of the wind moved diagonally, and then it floated.

"What do you think? It uses the same principle."

The man was not particularly surprised, and answered without hesitation. "Such a light plank must be able to float. But how heavy do you think this weird contraption is? Perhaps as heavy as you are?"

"……"

For the third time, laughter filled the room, and Nimya became silent out of disgust. The chief finally spoke, " Good grief. To go along with this frivolous talk."

"All of you…" Nimya spoke slowly. "Won't you let me test it at least?"

"If you're going again about tearing down the bronze statues for the sake of that test, then no way. Do you feel like destroying your house just to see if you can talk with ants?"

"If there is any possibility at all, I'll do it as early as tomorrow. I will need your help then." Nimya glared at the chief. The chief shook his head.

"Dear, dear. If only you made a machine that can be helpful in farming…. To waste the hard-earned fortune of your parents like this…"

"It's not a waste! This *will* fly!"

"Only if you are a wizard! Oh my, isn't that thing too fat too use as a broom, miss witch?"

Another one mocked, and everyone laughed. The chief issued a final warning to Nimya.

"Tomorrow afternoon, we will come to dismantle this weird machine. I'm afraid to say that as long as this thing exists, you will not be cured of your delusions. This is a final and immediate decision by the council. We will buy the engine and use it for a generator. Do you have anything to say?"

"I have."

"What is it?"

"Won't you move the bronze statues?"

The reply came immediately.

"Rejected."

"……"

"Now everyone. That's it for today. Go home. We'll continue this tomorrow."

The chief turned away and the rest of the crowd also left the warehouse.

The low hum of the ventilation fan echoed in the empty warehouse.

Nimya gulped down the already cold tea, and spoke to Kino and Hermes, who only looked on quietly from the start.

"Phew. It's just as you've seen. Not so boring, huh?"

"Well, yeah. …But there's one more guy left."

"Eh?"

Nimya turned around. There was indeed one person left — a young man wearing a neat, wrinkle-less, uniform. He gazed at Nimya grimly.

Nimya turned to Kino and Hermes, "Let me introduce you. This is my fiancée. It has been a long time since we met."

Kino bowed. The fiancée talked as he approached Nimya, "Nimya. You should understand by now. Won't you stop doing this sort of thing?"

"What do you mean by 'this sort of thing'?"

"Dreaming of riding this machine and flying. I don't want to say this, but I know that there's almost nothing left of the fortune you inherited from your parents. I also know that you haven't eaten any decent meal recently. And that you will most likely be broke by next week."

"……"

"You can live with me starting tomorrow. Move out of this place."

"……"

"There doesn't seem to be any malice in his proposal. But you know——" Hermes spoke to Kino who formed her fingers into a shush gesture.

The fiancée pleaded gently to the wordless Nimya.

"Can I stay here for tonight? I have something I would like to discuss with you."

"…I'm sorry, I have something to do." Nimya answered brokenly.

"What is it? Can I help you?" The fiancée offered at once, but Nimya only shook her head. Then she grabbed

him aggressively at the collar and planted a light kiss on his lips.

"No… just go home for today, I'll get in touch with you tomorrow."

The warehouse shutters were firmly closed as soon as the young man left.

Then Nimya walked briskly towards the flying machine and slapped its silver body with her palm.

"I have no time to waste! This will have to fly by tomorrow morning. And when it does, those obstinate mules will have to acknowledge it!"

"If only we have a road," Hermes quipped.

"Yeah! It will fly if only we have that. I'll be satisfied as long as it flies – even if it's just once! After that, I don't really care. I don't even mind crashing it in the chief's house!"

"Really?" Hermes asked amusingly, and Nimya's tone reverted back.

"…Well in any case, I'll have to think things through calmly." Nimya returned to the desk, handing a chair to Kino, who lightly thanked her and seated herself. Kino leaned on Hermes.

"At things stand, the gliding distance is still too short. I've computed it many times already, but even with the strong wind in the morning, there will still be at least one bronze statue on the way. It will be able to lift, but it will get dragged by that one statue," Nimya said as she looked at a piece of paper full of calculations.

"Even if you maximized the engine output?" Hermes asked.

"It won't be enough." Nimya and Hermes whined. Kino, who had no chance to speak earlier, casually chirped in.

"What about making a ramp before the statue to jump from? That's what's normally done to clear obstacles in the case of motorrads. This machine should be able to do the same thing…" Nimya stared at Kino dumbfoundedly . Kino added, "…Maybe?"

Nimya considered it for a moment before speaking. " That's right. If we do that, we don't have to move the statues…. That may work!"

"Kino, you're so smart!"

Kino slightly scratched her head at Hermes' gleeful praise. "Eh? Well, thanks."

"Just wait! I'll make the calculations." Nimya got to work on her desk and made numerous calculations. But her face returned to its bitter look after a while.

"It won't work. Even if I make a ramp before the statue , it will still require much speed. If I jump with what I have, I'll fall immediately."

"So it won't do, huh."

"But I'll work on this idea! I only have to do something about the launching speed. That's the only thing left for this to work." Once again, Hermes and Nimya grumbled, and once again Kino casually remarked.

"Well you could launch it with a gunpowder explosion , the way bullets are propelled in a persuader. Maybe…"

Nimya took one glance at Kino but quickly shook her head. "That's not possible. I understand that idea, but to propel something this big, we will need a tunnel just as huge. Besides, even if we do have something like that, the machine will break."

"Is that so…"

"Rejected. Sorry," Hermes said. Kino pointed her finger at Hermes beneath her. Then,

"Bang."

She mimicked the firing of a hand persuader. Then she lifted her right hand.

Nimya who was looking at her, knitted her eyebrows together and asked, "Kino. Just now, you were pretending to fire a persuader, right?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"But you raised your right hand."

"Of course. The recoil of this persuader is pretty strong ," Kino said as she tapped Canon on her thigh. Nimya's gaze froze, though she was not looking at anything in particular.

Then she cried out, "That's it!"

"Huh?"

"I don't need the blast, the recoil would be enough! Just like in a persuader, I'll put gunpowder inside a pipe, ignite them consecutively to produce a gas at high speeds ! If I put several such pipes on the machine, it will be able to dash!" While pointing inside the warehouse, "I have pipes! I have gunpowder! I can do this!"

"I get it! Kino, you're smart after all!" Hermes squealed in excitement.

But Kino could only mutter.

"What?"

The next day, that is, the third day since Kino entered the country.

The chief did not wake up at dawn.

He continued his pleasant slumber on top of his bed, where a refreshing wind passes through.

The sunlight filtered through the windows, and just when a powerful breeze blew in, noises coming from the main road wakened him: the low drone of a truck's engine, and the crashing sounds of something being laid down.

At that moment, fierce knocks were heard from the door, and his subordinate entered in a panic.

"Chief! Y-you have to see what's happening outside!"

The chief hurriedly put on his clothes. And upon coming out to the main road, he was rendered speechless .

In front of the official residence, the shortest bronze statue had turned into a ramp. It looked as if it was saddled with pipes and iron plates.

"Good morning, Chief."

The one who greeted the chief with a smile was Kino, who was going through the road placing ropes on the boundary with the walkway. The ropes were wrapped in yellow cloth printed with the words *'Danger. Please do not go to the road beyond this line'* in black letters.

The chief turned his gaze to the nearest bronze statue. Just before it was a machine, glittering silver underneath the morning light. It was the flying machine from the warehouse. But it had an added touch that was not there the day before – several thick pipes attached below its body. Nearby was the crane truck owned by the Tchuhachkova family.

The chief shook his head several times, and blinked his eyes.

On the opposite walkway, Kino was briskly laying down the ropes. Several people have come out, staring in shock and wondering what was going on. Kino addressed them with a smile.

"Everyone. Please do not go beyond these ropes. It's dangerous."

Hermes was parked obliquely in front of the plane. Nimya in her overalls was tying a rope on Hermes' carrier. The other end of the rope was tied to the tires of the flying machine.

Nimya climbed up the machine and sat in its cockpit. She put on her working goggles and gloves, and fastened the four-point seat belt. Then she waved to Kino who was now sitting astride Hermes, and gave her a thumbs up.

Kino started Hermes' engine. The boisterous roar of the engine reverberated across the road. The chief rushed to Kino and asked, "Traveler! What in the world is happening here?!"

"Chief. It's extremely dangerous, so please stand back. " Right after saying these words, Hermes' engine let out three explosive roars. The engine of the flying machine roared, and the giant fan began to turn.

The chief tried to say something, but Kino could no longer hear it.

The explosion prompted the people to gather, and soon the sidewalk was filled with bystanders. There were also those who looked out from their houses.

Kino gestured to the Chief to stand back, and then turned to Nimya who was looking back at her.

The roar coming from the machine became even louder.

Nimya raised both fists high in the air, and crossed them over her head. Then the moment she opened her arms, Kino quickly launched Hermes. The tirestops of the flying machine disconnected at the same time.

The machine began to slide forward. At the next moment, its engine gave off a roar that seemed three times louder. The pipes underneath its body spouted white smoke with great force.

"It exploded!"

"No. It's fine."

The chief shouted and Hermes muttered to no one in particular. The machine accelerated, as if it was kicked by some invisible giant, and sped to the ramp in no time. The buildings trembled with the explosion, and the necks of the onlookers turned swiftly towards one direction.

The machine ran up the ramp in an instant, and leaped against the wind while spouting out smoke from its rear.

Kino lost sight of the flying machine amidst the smoke. By the time the wind cleared up the fumes, she found its tiny form with the blue sky as its backdrop. The pipes that no longer emitted fumes became dislodged and fell away. It fell on the marshland outside the country, piercing into the slushy earth.

When it was almost invisibly small, it made a turn and returned towards the country and became bigger and bigger in view.

Soon, the people craning their necks into the sky gathered on the road. Everyone except for Kino had their mouths wide open in shock. They muttered simultaneously.

"It flew. That heavy thing is in the sky…"

"The machine is flying…"

"I don't believe this… it's impossible… but…"

"A human… flying…"

Kino, who had a smile on her face since Nimya dove to the sky, asked Hermes, "Any thoughts?"

"I'm a bit jealous. That's all."

Meanwhile, Nimya was yelling to the top of her voice.

"What now?! Didn't it fly?! It *is* flying! I was not wrong! Not my calculations, not my experiments! Nothing was a waste!"

Then the flying machine suddenly ascended even more, and just as it is, turned in the air.

"It's working perfectly! It can be maneuvered flawlessly! I was not wrong!" With utmost faith in her machine, Nimya turned in the air many times over, flying up and down and making abrupt turns again and again.

Eventually, it settled down with Nimya muttering.

"Ugh. I feel sick…"

—

"Everyone!"

Kino suddenly called out to the enthralled citizens.

"For the flying machine to land safely, it needs a long and perfectly straight road. If you wish to send back that person, who had done such a great deed, back to the ground, kindly move at least three of the statues. It will be even more helpful if you move four of them."

"U-understood! Right away!" The chief said with several nods.

"Everyone! Those statues are in the way! Move them, quickly!"

On the command of the chief, the people snapped back into reality and quickly took action. Using Nimya's crane truck, the bronze statues were rooted out, foundation and all. Then the planks used for the ramp were laid out above the holes. In their panic, they moved away seven statues.

In no time, they completed a long and perfectly straight path, on both sides of which gathered numerous people.

Soon the flying machine glided down to the main road . It lowered down slowly; its three tires touched the ground at the same time, then its engine stopped.

The machine ran from the momentum and stopped right before Kino.

The crowd timidly surrounded the machine. As Nimya took off her goggles and stood up from the cockpit, a noiseless stir spread through the crowd. Kino and Hermes watched from behind.

"Nimya…" The first to speak was her fiancée.

"See, it's just as I told you!" Nimya exclaimed happily, tapping the machine.

"Let's go on our honeymoon with that. Let's get married tomorrow!" The fiancée gently proposed as he looked up at Nimya.

"I didn't know… you… no, everyone…" Nimya said doubtfully and her fiancée cried out.

"You're a mage, aren't you?!"

"Huh?"

"We didn't realize it, and until now, we were acting foolishly and have been very rude to you. Please, forgive us helpless fools!"

"What?" As another question leaked from Nimya's lips, her fiancée dropped on his knees before her.

Forgive us! We're sorry! Please forgive us! Our apologies! Pardon us! We beg your forgiveness! We apologize! Sorry! Sorry! SORRY!

The people dropped to their knees one after another. It was like a spreading ripple, with Nimya and the flying machine at its center.

"Eh? W-wait, everyone!" Nimya became flustered.

"Lady Nimya! Oh, great mage! We truly regret our actions!" The chief, on his knees like the rest, pleaded with only his face raised.

"Please guide these helpless beings with your power! By the authority vested upon me as this country's leader, I hereby proclaim you governor! Please accept it."

"……"

While Nimya received expectant gazes from the chief and the citizens, Kino was busy packing her luggage on Hermes.

Someone noticed her and talked to her with an equally eager tone. "Great traveler! Could it be that you are a mage as well? If so, then by all means——"

"No, thank you! I'm about to go!" Kino said decisively as she tied her luggage firmly to Hermes.

Kino fixed her hat and strapped on her goggles. Nimya got off the machine and approached Kino. The crowd parted to make way for her.

Kino spoke to Nimya, "We're going to leave right now ."

"Eh? But, wait——" Nimya asked in surprise.

"I'm really sorry. I have to go. Things might get complicated…. By the way, congratulations."

"Congratulations. That was very impressive!"

Nimya looked around her and took a big breath. Then she looked back at Kino and Hermes, "You have my gratitude. This is all thanks to you." And with solemn eyes, "…It may only be chance or a whim that brought you to this country, but for me, it's fate. If it weren't for you, the machine would have been destroyed, and I would have lived the rest of my life in disappointment… I'm serious. Words can't express how grateful I am to you."

Nimya smiled and stretched out her hand. Kino gripped the hand offered to her, and once more,

"Congratulations. …I had so much fun."

"Me too. …Take care."

Nimya did not take away her glance from the motorrad until it vanished at a bend in the road. Then she gazed at her followers prostrate before her, and muttered,

"Then, what should I do from now on?"

Kino and Hermes passed through the unmanned gates and came out of the country.

It was filled with swamps like before, but not as muddy. It was much more easier to run through it than when they first came. Hermes spoke happily as the gates got smaller behind them.

"Wow, that was amazing! Just look at those surprised faces! They were like peas hit by a dove shooter!"

"…Doves hit by a peashooter?"

"Yeah, that's it," Hermes said and fell silent.

And the motorrad continued to make its way through the marshland.

After a while, Kino broke the silence. "Even so, that was unexpected. I was really surprised."

"Wasn't it? They shouted 'Mage! Please forgive us!' out of nowhere. It will take a while before the

misunderstanding gets cleared. I'm sure a statue will be erected for her very soon," Hermes said, and now it was Kino who turned mute.

"…Nope. I wasn't referring to that…"

"Eh? What do you mean?" Hermes probed into Kino's ambiguous reply.

"I didn't think that machine could really fly," Kino answered.

"Kino… what did you just say?"

"I said, I didn't think that there could be one — a machine that could fly. I understood the theory she explained to me, but I didn't believe it was possible…. It was really amazing."

For a while, only the hum of the motorrad's well-regulated engine could be heard. The waterfowl at the side of the roads let out choking cries, and flew away all at once.

"Kino! Then why did you cooperate in the first place?"

Hermes' question was met with an impassive response . "Why? Well, if it worked I would see something interesting. If it didn't, that person would probably give up. Besides…"

"Besides?"

"I was bored."

Dead silence. After a while, Hermes asked reluctantly, "…T-then, assuming you weren't bored in that country, would you have helped her?"

"I may not have. Why, under normal circumstances, if you told me a thing like that could fly, I wouldn't have believed you."

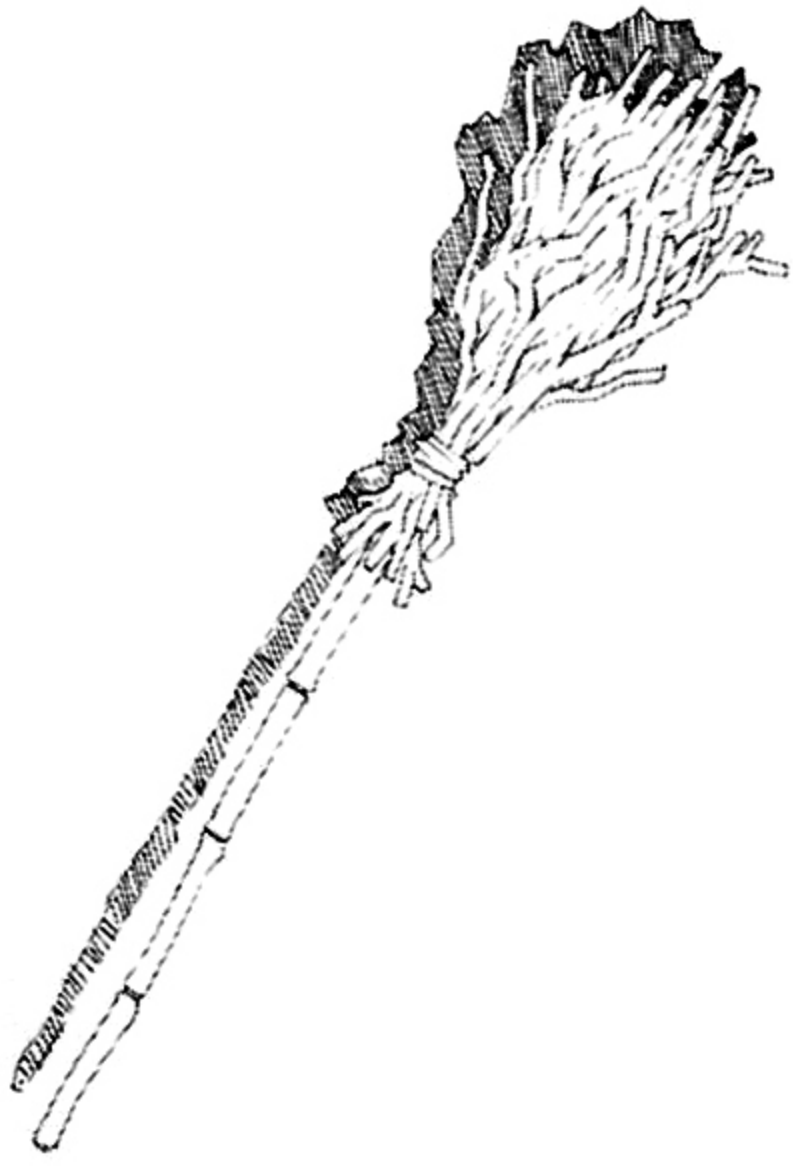
"……"

And Kino dealt the final blow to the speechless Hermes. "It really flied — just like magic. To see something that amazing was worth going through all that mud. …What's wrong, Hermes?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just pondering over the range of potential human beings have."

"Uh-huh…"

Kino replied half-heartedly to Hermes' serious ramblings as they leisurely traversed the road by the side of the swamp.

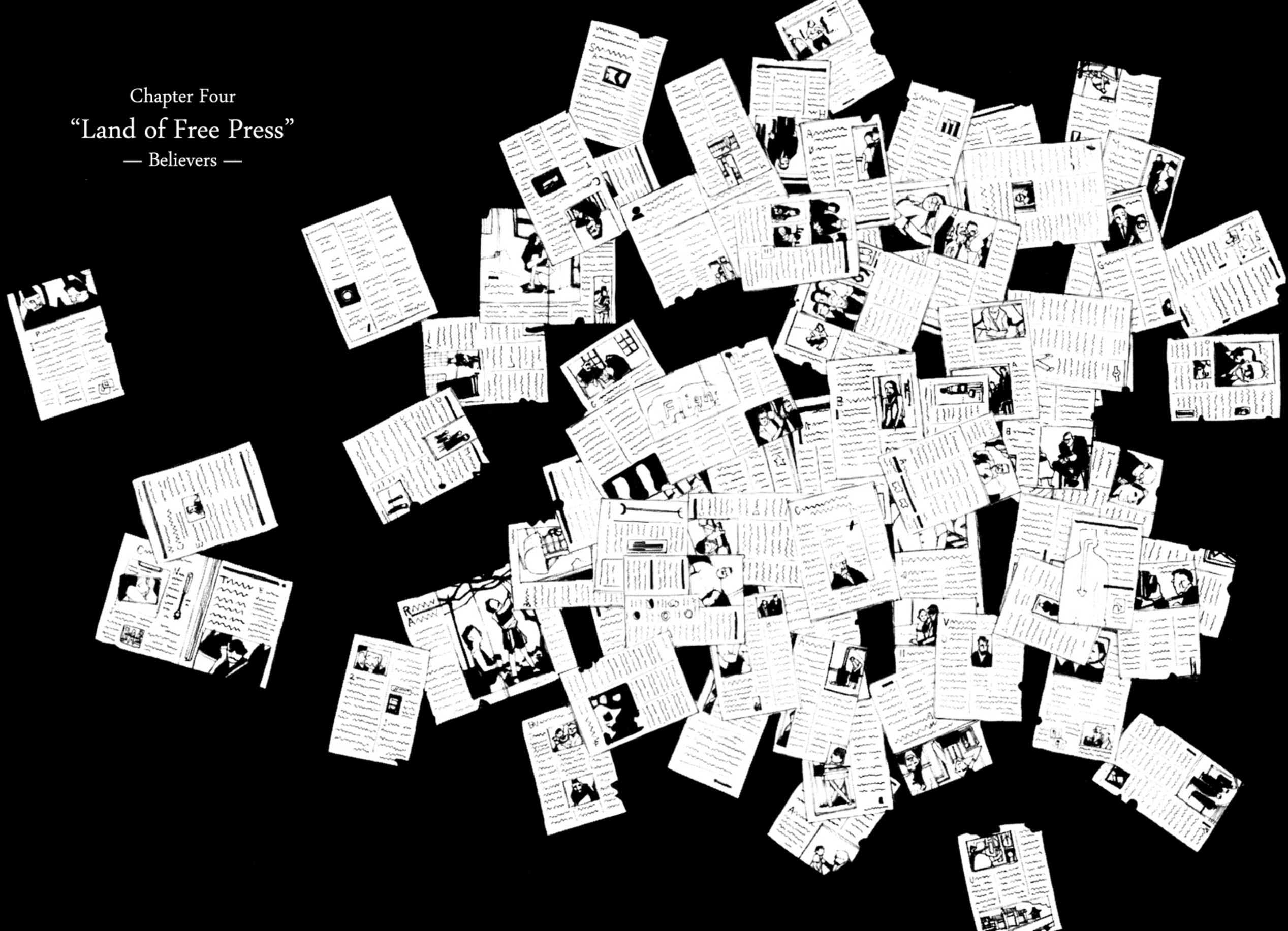


“Land of Free Press” —Believers—

Chapter Four

"Land of Free Press"

— Believers —



MEDIASQUARE DAILY PRESS

5th of Doe, Year 893

TRAVELER SHOT MAN, THE POLICE DEEM SELF-DEFENSE

The 4th. Daytime. At West 56th Street, a traveler (age unknown) who entered the city two days before, shot a businessman (age, 55), inflicting severe injuries. The police recognized that it was an act of self-defense on the part of the traveler, who was able to leave the borders that evening. Police will further discuss enforcement of laws regarding self-defense and persuader ownership.

MALE BUSINESSMAN WOUNDED SERIOUSLY FOR “SUSPECTED THEFT”

Morning of the 4th, around 11:29. On 56th Street in the western district, a visiting traveler who entered the city two days before got into an argument with a male company executive who wished to take a closer look at the traveler’s motorrad. When the man tried to approach,

the traveler quickly shot him twice with a persuader, hitting him in the right shoulder and right leg. The man was immediately taken to a nearby hospital by medics, but would require a full month to recover from his severe injuries.

The traveler stayed for police interrogation, where the traveler claimed self-defense against the company executive, who allegedly attempted to steal the motorrad. The police accepted the explanation, and the traveler was allowed to leave the country the same evening without any further incident.

The case took place in the crowded shopping district in front of the western gate, causing quite a commotion among the onlookers. Luckily, no one else was hurt by stray bullets.

In relation to "justifiable self-defense", there was a case four days ago in the southern district where a policeman fired without warning at a young man who attacked his fellow police officer. The young man died from 14 bullet wounds. The police also deemed the shooting as an act of self-defense, but many who believed that it was an act of police brutality took to the streets in protest. *(See page 39 for details.)*

STREET KILLINGS? THE TRAGEDY OF " SELF-DEFENSE" SHOOTINGS

A peaceful street was disturbed by a loud gunshot, followed by cries of panic. All this happened in broad daylight and in plain view of pedestrians.

At the scene, a man was found curled up on the pavement, his shoulder and leg bleeding profusely. A frantic young woman was at his side providing medical assistance. Witnesses reported that the traveler with the smoking persuader did not act to aid the wounded man, but merely stood and looked on coldly.

The 55-year old man is a company executive from a leading medical equipment firm. On the day of the incident, the man was visiting the area for business reasons. He was dining with his colleagues at a nearby restaurant before the shooting occurred.

According to his colleagues' statement, the man was engaged in lively conversation when he noticed the parked motorrad by the street. He purportedly remarked

that it was "a nice motorrad." Its owner appeared shortly and sternly warned the man to stay away from the motorrad.

Although the man gently rebuked the young traveler for his tone, the traveler paid no heed and shouted at the man to stay away from the motorrad. When he attempted to step closer, the traveler open fired without warning. The man was wounded in his right shoulder and right leg, and the pain caused him to collapse onto the pavement.

He was immediately sent to a hospital to undergo an emergency surgery, but due to the severity of his wounds, it would take at least a month for him to completely recover. The shot to the leg was particularly treacherous, narrowly missing major arteries by a few inches. The lead surgeon commented that if the shot was any closer, it would have sent him into a critical condition. The trauma from the injuries affected the man's memory of the incident.

The man's family also gave their statements about the incident. Unable to hide their disbelief, one of them remarked: "How could something like this happen?" Later that evening, upon learning that the police had

marked the case as rightful self-defense and allowed the traveler to exit the borders, the family member was outraged further into saying, "Even though he (the man) had done nothing wrong, he was shot, while the shooter was able to walk off scotch free! This is unjust!" The man's attorney expressed, "We can't let the police continue with their tyranny." They are considering filing charges against the police who resolved the case as a mere act of self-defense.

EXPERTS' VIEW

JUSTIFIABLE SELF-DEFENSE WILL BE THE DOWNFALL OF THIS NATION

(Tony Methone - Former Judge of the South District Court)

I believe that the traveler had chosen to fire unnecessarily. It would not be hard to imagine that the traveler believes himself to be above the law and beyond retribution, just because of the fact of him being a foreigner. To shoot a citizen without provocation tells us that the traveler is a bloodthirsty fiend. It greatly

disappoints me that the traveler was not arrested and brought to a court of law. This was indeed a failure for the nation.

TOLERANCE TOWARDS SHOOTING INCIDENTS

(Nihal Ruthbator - Chairman of Citizen's Eye on the Police)

Lately there have been many cases where the police use rightful self-defense as an excuse in shooting incidents. Since the fatal shooting four days before, persuader ownership and the definition of self-defense have been a hot topic on everyone's lips. Now with the latest shooting, I can't help but think that this is too great a coincidence. Could it be that someone is manipulating the situation behind the scenes? The traveler probably was in no danger of being arrested in the first place. The traveler could be getting paid for his involvement this very moment just beyond the border!

MEDIASQUARE DAILY PRESS

7th of Doe, Year 893

READER'S REVIEW CORNER

STRICTER IMMIGRATION INSPECTIONS

(Betty Teteths — Female, Age 28, Homemaker)

"Ouch! Ouch!"

Was my first response when I heard about the west district shooting on the radio. The one where a man was badly wounded by a traveler with a persuader.

I also heard there was an uproar over the police's decision regarding the shooting. But what troubles me is how someone like that could be allowed to enter our border? I demand that the immigration office take responsibility!

For us law-abiding citizens, to own a persuader would require a strict background check, especially for small firearms. Yet, this traveler who openly displays a persuader was allowed to enter the border. I was even more shocked to learn that the traveler was allowed to leave the country on the same day after the incident. It pains me to hear the situation of the hospitalized man.

When the news was released, I was called back to reality by my 5-year-old son. He was asking me with a serious face, "Where did it hurt, Mommy?" I hurriedly told my boy, "Don't worry, mommy's fine now." To think that my dear boy would be worried about me, it fills me with tears. As I hold him tightly, my heart is filled with rage towards the callous traveler. To let someone so dangerous enter our country armed is a huge mistake! For the safety of my child, I hope immigration will impose stricter regulations.

"PLEASE THROW AWAY YOUR PERSUADER, TRAVELER"

(Anne Yelets — Female, Age 7, Grade school student)

Something bad happened near my home: a man who was looking at a motorrad was shot by the owner, hurting the man's shoulder and leg.

Why would the traveler do that? I don't understand why.

"He was trying to steal my motorrad," the traveler said. But I think the man just wanted to take a closer look at the beautiful motorrad. I think the man must be really

hurt, and his parents must be hurt too. Can't the traveler feel their pain? I believe the traveler has a waiting mommy and daddy at home, too; how would the traveler feel if they were hurt? I would like to know.

Persuaders are bad things that are used to hurt and kill people and animals. I wish they would disappear, so that no one will get hurt again. Please throw away your persuader, traveler. And please have a heart for others.

ON THE TRANSPARENCY OF COMPETITIONS' CLOSED-DOOR SCREENING

(Eliza Blau - Female, Age 64, Homemaker)

A few days back, this paper announced the results of the naming contest of a 2-month-old forest panda. I too have participated in the contest and eagerly awaited the result.

To conjure up the serene image of adorable pandas living peacefully in the lush green forest, I named the newborn "Woods". A simple name that even children can easily pick up, yet still carries the majesty of the forest, I believe there can be no better name than this and was very confident with the contest.

But my heart sank when the results were announced.

Not only did my submission not make it into the consolation, the biggest shock was that the winning name was "Woody", a mere single character's difference from mine. I would not have minded so such if they were both vastly different, but this result makes me doubt the decision of the panel of judges.

The winning name came from a 17-year-old girl from the northern district. Could a girl shallow in life's experiences come up with a winning name?

I know that my suspicion seems beastly, but I think the panel of judges took my submission and altered it slightly. Pretending it was submitted by the pre-selected girl, they announced her as the winner.

There have been previous cases of corruption between organizer and the judging party, and it would be hard to warrant that such handy-panty did not happen this time also.

So, for future contests such as this, there should be a neutral third party audit overseeing the process much like the Anti-Corruption Agency for the government.

NEWSWORKS DAILY

5th of Doe, Year 893

TRAVELER SHOT MAN, THE POLICE DEEM SELF-DEFENSE

On the 4th, a traveler (age unknown) who entered the border two days earlier, shot a man at West 56th Street in broad daylight. The man (age, 55) was reportedly fiddling with the traveler's motorrad. As the man refused to stop even after repeated warnings, the traveler fired his persuader out of necessity. Police deemed the shooting as a case of legal self-defense, and the traveler was able to leave the country the same evening.

ATTEMPTED THEFT? MAN RECEIVES MINOR WOUNDS

At around 11:29 on the morning of the 4th, on West 56th Street, a traveler who entered the country for sightseeing found a man trying to mount a motorrad that belonged to him without permission. The traveler issued

several verbal warnings to the man, but he was too drunk to take heed and replied with threats. When the man grabbed the traveler, the traveler was forced to shoot him with a persuader (a .22 automatic) twice. The man was hit in the right shoulder and right leg and was rushed to the hospital with minor wounds. Doctors reported that recovery would take no more than a week.

The traveler was questioned by officers at the scene, and after collecting reports from witnesses, the police deemed the traveler acted in self-defense and was released from custody and allowed to pass through the border that evening. According to the police, the traveler held no grudge towards the country for this incident.

The man was under the influence of alcohol during the incident, and was unable to recall what happened after he was sent to the hospital. He was given a stern warning by the police.

Crime is on the rise in our nation, and it has become a serious concern. Four days before in the southern district, there was a case of a drug addict injuring his physician-in-charge to escape the hospital. He later attempted to take a patrolling police's persuader by force with a knife, and another officer was forced to shoot the

addict to avoid a catastrophe. *(More detail in Local News Section)*

ARROGANT BEHAVIOR UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL; NO CHARGES FILED

At the time, the man probably thought he was allowed to do whatever pleased him. He meddled with another person's possession, attempting to handle and operate a motorrad without permission from its owner.

The thing of note in yesterday's incident was that the man was clearly intoxicated and was barely standing when he was shot by the traveler.

He was participating in a company function at a nearby restaurant. According to restaurant staff, they had been drinking a lot and were being loud and disrespectful to other patrons. One of the staff who tried to calm them down received a face full of vulgarity.

After the man left the restaurant, the motorrad caught his attention and he immediately went to it, grabbing the handles and knocking on the gas tank. He was on the verge of hopping onto the motorrad when the traveler returned carrying fresh sandwiches for lunch.

The collection of witnesses reported that the traveler was being tactful with the encounter, but the man would have none of it, spouting phrases such as, "You're not the boss of me!", "I once rode something like this, so this is mine!", "Show your respect, youngster, and get lost!" and more unintelligent babble. The traveler continued to request that the man leave the motorrad several times in a cool and calm voice, but the man somehow took offense at the traveler's tone and kicked the motorrad several times. He also repeatedly threw curses and tried to grapple the traveler. This is when the traveler was forced to shoot him.

Even though the bullet hit him in the shoulder, the man continued to yell and stagger toward the traveler, forcing another shot to the leg from the traveler to finally stop his rampage.

Examination reports from the hospital tell us that the persuader used was of low caliber range, and would not be fatal as long as it did not hit the head or chest. In the man's case, the wounds he received clearly show that the traveler is a highly-skilled persuader-user, as he was able to avoid major arteries and bones.

Being the victim of this incident, the traveler was released and allowed to leave the country that evening. No charges were pressed against the man, thus no punishment was issued and his name was not revealed.

But that was probably not the end; the rampaging of drunks might not only cause trouble to travelers, but could also quite possibly harm citizens.

EXPERTS' VOICE

THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF SELF-DEFENSE SHOOTINGS

(Ole Tucker - Retired Director of Ministry of National Defense)

The traveler acted to protect the safety of his life and property, a fully understandable act of self-preservation. The man had been messing with the traveler's property and chose to ignore repeated warnings by the traveler. Witnesses of the incident point out that the man was shouting gibberish and was prepared to attack the traveler. Under no circumstance should violence be used as a solution, but I would like to applaud the experienced

and cool-headed officer for classifying this incident as legal self-defense.

INTENSIFY ALCOHOL INTOXICATION LAWS

(Timothy Tenostor — Chairman of "Parents Who Lost Children to Alcohol Abuse")

"Lawless, shameful and childish" might be the words the traveler would think of at the mention of this nation. If he or she were to be further charged with criminal offenses, that would truly be tragic. I wish to applaud our police force for their correct decision, for we always turn a blind eye to drunks. Now is the time to face this growing social issue! Including the problem of underage drinking, laws against alcoholism need to be enforced now before our children become the next victims, because by then it will be too late.

NEWSWORKS DAILY

7th of Doe, Year 893

CITIZENS' OPINION

ONE STEP AWAY FROM VICTORY

(Eliza Blau - Female, Age 64, Homemaker)

A few days back, this paper announced the results of the naming contest of a 2-month-old forest panda. I too have participated in the contest and eagerly awaited the result.

To conjure up the serene image of adorable pandas living peacefully in the lush green forest, I named the newborn "Woods". A simple name that even children can easily pick up, yet still carries the majesty of the forest, I believe there can be no better name than this and was very confident with the contest.

But my heart sank when the results were announced.

Not only did my submission not make it into the consolation, the biggest shock was that the winning name was "Woody", a mere single character's difference

from mine. I have participated in similar public contests before, and this was the first where I was so close to victory, making the defeat all the more bitter.

But I will not give up, and will use this experience as a drive to perform better next time, even if my friends call me stubborn and out of league. *(Editorial department: An edit has been made.)*

"ARMED EQUALS VILLAIN" MENTALITY

(Norgen Heidini — Male, Age 76, Unemployed)

There was a case of a shooting on the 4th involving a man and a traveler, and when I heard the man's family attempted to sue the police force for their decision, it filled me with disgust.

The man was drunk in broad daylight, disturbing other's property, and was ignoring warnings from the owner while being aggressive towards him. It boggles my mind that the man still thinks he is innocent and not in the wrong. I would very much like to see the people who raised this brute!

Some might think the traveler had murder in mind, but the traveler only shot him in the shoulder and leg after repeated warnings. As someone who has served forty years in the police force at the front lines against crime, if murder was the motive, the traveler would have aimed for the head or chest instead. If we were to frame the traveler as a criminal just because of the shooting, that would have been a grave mistake.

Can we afford to hide our heads and assume that "all those who use weapons, e.g. persuaders, are bad guys," making judgments without considering the circumstances? Imagine you are caught in this situation; what actions would you take? I hope everyone would cool their heads and not overreact over this incident.

TRAVELER'S ACTION REMINDS ME OF A DARK PAST

(Anonymous — Female, Age 30, Company Employee)

The incident reminds me of something that happened to me before.

I was sexually assaulted by a drunk when I was fifteen .

Although it was broad daylight, a red-faced drunk in his 50's suddenly grabbed me on the street. I wasn't even able to scream out of panic. The man continued to grope me, and with his breath stinking of alcohol, he spat obscenities at me before staggering off laughing.

It was several hours later before my mother found me crying by the street, and took me to the hospital, reporting the incident to the police.

The police brought the man shortly, and in my rage and shame, I vowed to bring him to justice. So I identified him as the culprit. But the man proclaimed loudly, "I am the headmaster of a renowned high school, there is no way that I could have done this! If you continue this nonsense, I will sue you and your parents for defamation of character!"

Suffice to say, he was released due to lack of evidence. He left not before hurling more obscenities and threats, and my father later found out that the man truly was as he said, a headmaster of a renowned high school and quite high up in the education ministry.

When he passed away several years later, rumors of his past started to surface. That he could not hold his liquor and had repeatedly used obscenities in PTA meetings. But I don't wish to dig up filth on a dead man, since I have no proof that the incident even took place.

I just wish to express my admiration to the officer who decided to let the traveler go.

"——and that's it, Hermes."

Someone spoke in the middle of a desert.

She sat on a sea of hardened sand that spread out in all directions. The sun was setting in the west, staining the earth and sky a bright orange.

She was about fifteen, with a mop of short black hair. Large eyes adorned her fearless face, and she wore a black jacket over her shoulders, a simple but thick belt

around her waist, and a holster containing a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) over her right thigh.

In her hands was a newspaper that she had just finished reading out loud, and scattered all around her were more newspaper sheets that she had finished perusing.

Parked nearby was a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

A rifle-type persuader was leaning against the motorrad, next to a large travel bag.

Hermes, the motorrad, happily chirped in. "A persuader-user who travels on a motorrad? That sounds just like you Kino! I bet anyone who has read the news would have gone 'Oh! That's Kino!'"

The girl named Kino, smiled sourly and said, "You are being rude…. I would never open fire on a street like that ."

"Oh well, maybe." Hermes paused and asked, "Why do you think the fellow opened fire?"

She stared at the dipping sun in the far horizon and answered honestly.

"I don't know. I can't make a sound conclusion from these reports. He might be a trigger-happy sadist who likes to taunt his victims, or he could be a man of justice who only retaliates when forced. Or he could be both."

"Is that so… but Kino, have you realized the most critical thing that is missing from all of these reports?"

"Hm? What?" Kino tilted her head to one side with a look of confusion. Hermes quickly solved the mystery himself.

"The motorrad's side of the story, of course! They never bothered to interview the biggest witness to the incident! And they call this unbiased reporting?"

Hermes continued to fume, while the orange in the sky was slowly replaced by shades of purple, with stars beginning to appear.

Kino removed a blanket from the luggage and laid it out on the ground, then put on her brown coat. She picked up the rifle that was leaning on Hermes, and checked its chamber to see whether it was loaded. After

readjusting the scope on the persuader, she laid it down next to the rug.

"Why do you carry *those* newspapers anyway?" The question suddenly popped into Hermes' mind.

"The news is just a coincidence… as to why,"

Kino started to remove single sheets of paper from the stack, and twisted them as if drying a towel, then laid them out in a sunburst formation.

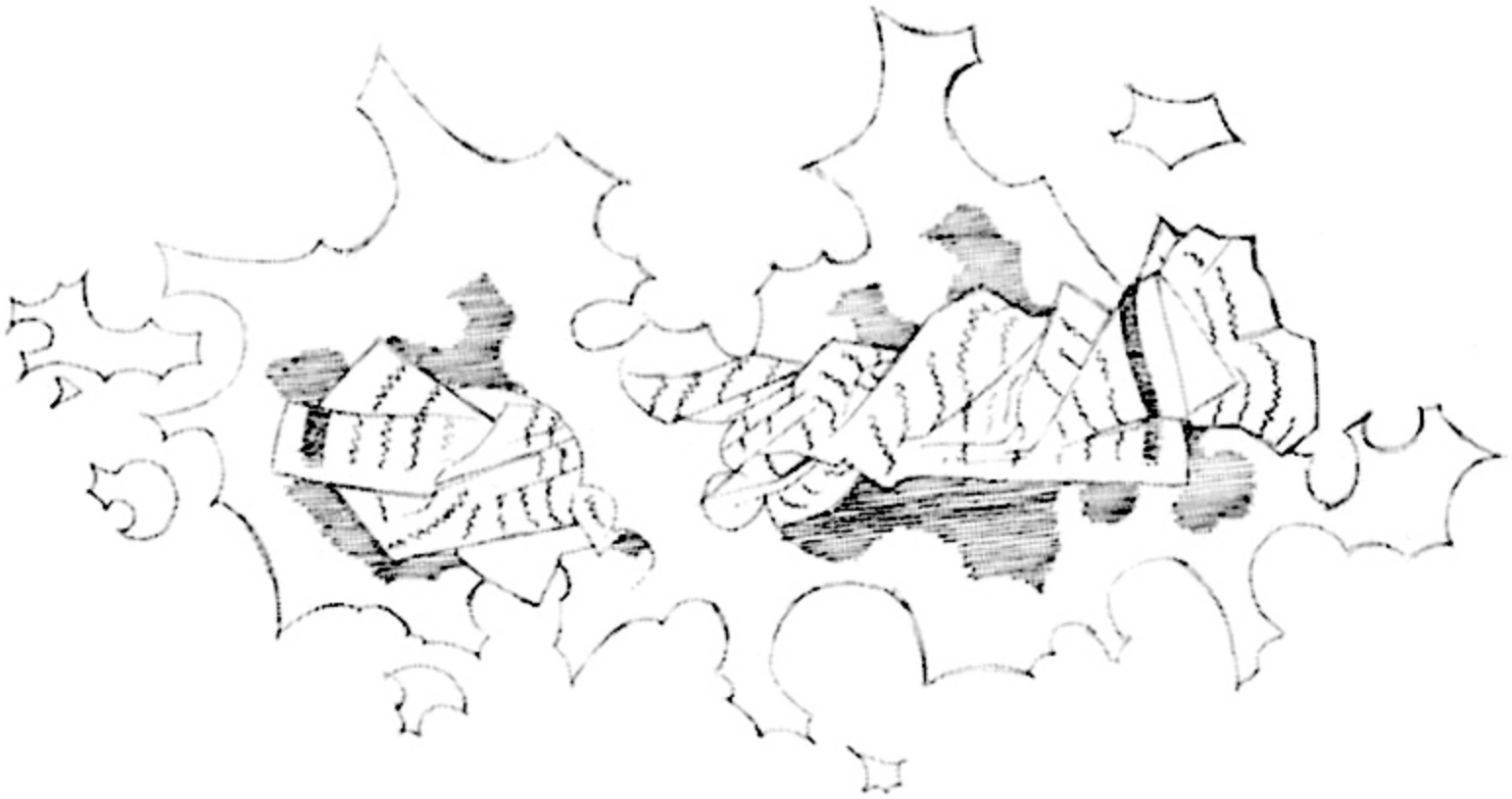
"When there's no firewood around, they become a useful replacement." Kino lit a match with a single stroke on her boot, and as she let the tiny flame lick the newspapers,

"What's printed on them doesn't matter."

—

Under the deep, starry purple sky, the earth was pitch black.

Except for a tiny dot of light.



“A Picture’s Tale” —Happiness—

Chapter Five

"A Picture's Tale"

— Happiness —

"Isn't it a great piece of art?"

The hotel manager asked of the traveler, when he found the traveler looking at a portrait of a battle tank decorating the lobby. In it, the tank was in the midst of blasting away at the enemy.

"I have seen many pictures of tanks by the same artist. Is his work very popular?"

"Good question," the manager replied, nodding his head several times before continuing in a hushed tone. " There was a civil war between the races here about ten years ago. Neighbor killed neighbor for four years and six months before we finally realized the futility of the war."

"…Does the war have anything to do with this picture ?"

"This portrait reminds us about that foolish war that every citizen in this nation abhors. The artist rekindled our disgust with war by painting images of battle scenes, strengthening our resolution against war. That is why his works are common in the nation."

"Ah, I see."

"Two years ago, this artist appeared out of nowhere, painting nothing but tanks on the battlefield, every one of them a great piece in itself. Not only has he become famous for his works, but he was also appointed as our Ambassador of Peace. Traveler, have you been to the city hall?"

—

After stepping into the richly built stone and mortar building, an open gallery stood to welcome all visitors. On one of the gallery's walls was a huge painting. It was a battle scene on a wide open field, and tanks could be seen in this piece as well. Below the painting was a stone slab with these words:

[Behold! Behold the hands of the dead reaching for the sky from their burning tank, telling us to learn from our mistake and aim for a higher purpose called Peace.]

"Amazing isn't it? Those words were written by the current governor."

Announced a man in his fifties, who proclaimed himself the headmaster of a primary school that had just purchased a piece of artwork from the artist.

"I plan to have it on display so that the students will learn the horrors of war. That battle tanks are not objects of admiration, but merely tools for ravaging the lives of many. It cost a heavy sum but I believe it will serve better than a book in telling the lesson. Traveler, have you seen the art book?"

Stacked in the most convenient spot were copies of the aforementioned art book. Even before the traveler managed to reach down for a copy, another copy had just been sold at the counter.

On the cover was a note,

[*Rebuilding the Nation with Canvas*, a must read for all citizens.]

The traveler flipped through the art book.

Sure enough, it was filled with the images of tanks in war. One of them had a comment made by the book writer.

[We can only watch as the tanks grind mercilessly over the flowers, each one of them representing the lost life of a nameless soldier.]

Also included were comments made by the gallery owner who first discovered the talented artist.

[…although his works are only of battle tanks, it is not the image that matters but the message of the artist itself. The tank may have powerful weaponry and great armor, but on the field of war it is not invincible. This painting symbolizes the strength and frailness of man's determination. Which is…]

The traveler closed the book with a thud and recalled the words of the excited hotel manager.

"A masterpiece has great power, and it deeply moves the emotion of the viewer. Five years, ten years, maybe even twenty years from now, how will I feel when I look upon this portrait again? I hope that, at that time, I feel the same way toward it that I do now."

—

On the morning of the third day, Kino rose with the sun as always.

"Good morning, Hermes."

Luggage was piled on the motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) called Hermes, and they left the inn shortly after.

Later, as they were traveling along a stretch of lonely road in the outlying farmland, they came across a young man sitting alone on a stool.

"Wow, that is a nice motorrad you've got there. Are you a traveler?"

Kino and Hermes slowed to a stop.

"Yes, we were just leaving."

"What are you doing out here?" Hermes chirped.

"I'm a painter, and I'm here to gather inspiration." Leaning on his stool was a folded easel, a huge canvas, and a bag stained with different colors of paint.

"Hmm… are your works popular?"

"Yep, my works are everywhere. There's even one at the city hall."

"Are they about the tanks?" Hermes asked again.

"Yeah, you have seen them?"

Kino nodded. "Yes, they are everywhere. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Why do you only draw tanks on the battlefield?"

The painter beamed and replied, "Good question!" He answered happily.

"I love tanks! Aren't they cool? They have great armor, a powerful arsenal and treads that grind over everything! They are the kings of the battlefield!"

A grin slowly crept on Kino's face.

"I just love to paint tanks running through the battlefield, that's why I draw them and nothing else. One day I took a painting to the art gallery and they told me it would sell very well. I was speechless! They kept saying something about 'never repeating past mistakes' and then offered me a large sum of money. Now I could eat anything I want and buy all the materials I need. And the best thing of all is I could spend the whole day painting!"

"You seem to be doing very well."

Hearing that from Hermes, the young painter nodded eagerly.

"I am very happy with my life now. Why, I get to do what I love! Hey traveler, you get to see a lot of places right? I bet you have seen different types of tanks in other countries. Maybe there is a tank that can submerge in water, have multiple turrets, or fires armor-piercing uranium cores or maybe fragment shells that explode inside the tank." The painter stared dreamily into space, and then his eyes suddenly brightened.

"That's right! That's why I love tanks! I'm getting some much needed inspiration. This time I'll draw a

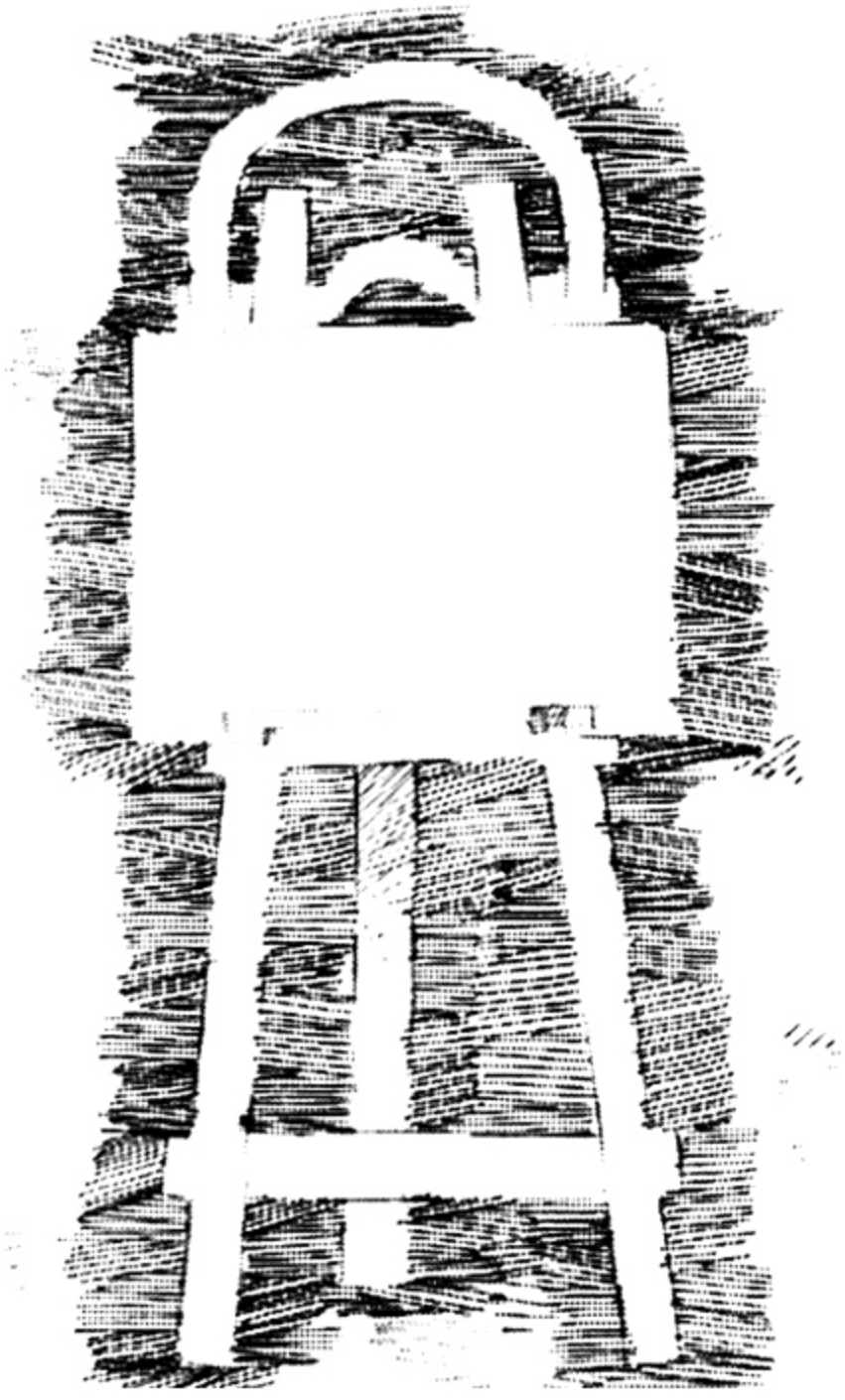
turretless type, with its cannon fixed on the frame, and aims using a hydraulic suspension system! Oh! It will have a dozer that ambushes the enemy in their foxholes! And with one hit of its 105mm cannon, the enemy's tank will be set ablaze and the soldiers inside will come out dancing like dolls on fire! Yeah, serves them right! I'll annihilate them all! Cool! It will be an amazing picture!"

The painter trembled, his hands formed into fists. Then he immediately set up his easel and put the canvas in place.

"It's about time for us to go." Kino started Hermes' engine and turned to the young man who was starting to slab paint on his palette. "Please take care, and continue to draw nice pictures."

"Thank you! You take care, too. Have a nice trip!" The painter answered with a smile.

And the motorrad rode away, leaving the young man painting another battle tank.



“Homecoming” —“She” is Waiting For You.—

Chapter Six

"Homecoming"

— "She" is Waiting For You. —

I'm home.

The gray edifice visible beyond the thick forest are the walls of the place where I was born in, the country where I spent fifteen years of my life. Thanks to the trees cleared out of the way, I could make out the form of the lofty watchtower. There's no mistaking it.

Though I haven't seen it for five years, it was exactly as I remember it. For a while, I was looking dazedly at the scenery as if I was in a dream.

I hoisted my heavy luggage once again, and began to walk slowly along the river towards my hometown.

Just a little bit more. Perhaps I'll arrive at the gates before it gets dark.

I didn't have a father; he died before I was born. My mother made a living by selling jam she prepares at

home. Her jam had a good reputation, so we lived happily and never had to worry of becoming poor.

Even back when I was a child, this country has always been peaceful, and at the same time, boring. Being a country that lives on harvested crops, our lives consisted of doing the same tasks every day. And on top of this, I would see my mother’s form boiling the same fruits day in and day out.

When I turned eleven or twelve, I started to seriously think about being an adventurer. I’ll get out of this country, go to many different places, and live each day of my life in excitement and discovery.

These feelings grew stronger and stronger, and at last on my fifteenth birthday, I decided to leave the country.

Of course, my mother was strongly against it.

"A human is best suited to live in the place where he was born. Why can't you understand that?" So my mother said.

But of course, these things did not matter to me. Because she did her best to raise me on her own, I felt a little bad about leaving her, but I was too busy chasing my dreams.

Other than my mother, there was one other person who held me back. It's Toto.

A girl younger than me by five years, Toto was adopted by my mother when I was only ten. It was because her dead parents were close friends of my mother.

Toto was a very quiet and shy girl. She couldn't deal with people all that well, and avoided others all the time, so she could not even attend school.

Eventually, Toto learned how to make jam from mother and became good at it in no time. From then on, she always helped mother.

“Unlike the clumsy you, this girl is really useful. After I die, she’ll inherit my recipes and the shop, and you’ll be good enough as a bodyguard, right Schwarz?” I would be teased by my mother, who could now relax thanks to Toto.

—

Before long, Toto and I became close to each other. We often played together when we have no work to do.

The game we like best is pretending to have a gunfight . With a water pistol, I would hide in ambush and suddenly jump out and surprise Toto.

“If you don’t dodge, you’ll get hit! If you dodge, I’ll hit you!”

If I hit her I win, but when Toto realizes my ambush and dodge, she wins.

At first, I would always win and Toto ends up soaked to the skin. But eventually, Toto would find me no matter where I hide, and would quickly dodge even before I get to say my little speech. And then I wouldn't win at all. Toto would always laugh heartily, seeing how frustrated I was.

—

"Do you really have to leave no matter what? I don't want you to go, Master Schwarz. I want us to live together right here, always."

These words, which Toto would say while staring intently at me, were much stronger than my mother's pleadings, and would always sway my decision to leave.

Maybe the one I loved more than anybody else at that time was this little girl who adored me.

Even so, I have already made my decision, and on the morning of my fifteenth birthday, I set off. Those that I

left, my country, my mother, and most especially, Toto — I tried my best not to think of them.

And Toto's words of farewell were,

"I'm sure you'll come home someday. Master Schwarz , you will definitely return. Until that day, I will always be right here waiting…"

—

I abandoned my country for a journey. But in the end, it granted me none of the things I desired. My vague dreams of living every day of my life in excitement and adventure, was not there. It was nowhere.

There was a severe drought in the first country I arrived in, and only harsh farm work awaited anyone who came looking for a job. But in order to earn my future travel expenses, I had to live there for a year.

In the next country, I was recruited as a mercenary for a war. I volunteered, hoping to become a distinguished

hero, but all I was made to do was carry luggage. To make matters worse, the war did not push through. I was told that I was no longer needed, and I was kicked out of the country once I received my payment.

In the country I lived in next, people excavated jewels for a living. I gladly joined in, but having no knowledge or experience, I became a mere dog for an opportunist company. I worked every day in a dangerous hole, digging for ore that will never be my own. I quit and waited for spring.

In the last country, I became a prison guard. By chance , there was a vacancy, so I applied. However, this job offered me nothing but free time. The prisoners were very obedient, and have no thoughts of escaping. I got tired of it, and escaped as soon as I found an opportunity . How ironic — it's the guard who ran away instead of the prisoners.

After that, nothing satisfied me, so I ended up wandering aimlessly from place to place. I was not able to stay long in any one country, and there was no job I was interested enough to take. Day by day, my effort all goes to searching for food inside the forest, the seas, and rivers.

I continued living this way for half a year, before I finally decided to go back to my country.

—

I walked for some time since I first saw the walls, and just when its height seemed twice as much as before, I heard the sound of splashing water — animals, no doubt.

I couldn't see through the thick vegetation, but I could hear the noise coming from the direction of my country, just ahead of me. I pulled out the revolver from the holster on my waist. I slowly distanced myself from the river and took a little detour. And then I peered at the river from afar.

There was a human. At the opposite bank, there was a girl with only her underwear on, taking a bath. She was around fifteen years old, with a skinny body and short black hair. I knew instantly that it must be Toto.

It seems that Toto did not notice my presence. I gazed at her figure with mixed feelings——.

It was quite painful for me to admit that I was mistaken.

I couldn't acknowledge it. Even though I have realized long ago that I was wrong for leaving the country, wandering for the sake of a dream that was impossible to achieve, I couldn't admit it.

But, as I was looking at Toto's form like this, a bitter smile came to my lips. I accepted it with utmost honesty; that I was such a big fool, and that mother and Toto were right.

In any country, the people born and raised in it would live each day in search of happiness and purpose in the existence that they were given. I used to think that this was a mediocre and dull way to live one's life.

Now the idea seemed very appealing to me. Together with Toto, we will make a living by preparing and selling jam. Of course, there was no other way of life for us. It

took five years for me to understand this, to realize how foolish I was. It didn't go to waste.

—

Now, there are several things that I want to do.

First, I will apologize to my mother and Toto with all my heart, for making them worry about me.

Then I intend to take jam-making more seriously than I ever had in my whole life. I would take care of Toto more than anyone else, she who works so hard each day to make jam as good as my mother's. If the house has become old, I'll bake some bricks to repair it. Collecting, drying, and chopping firewood will also become my daily chore from now on.

But before that, the most important thing of all is to show Toto that I have come back home safely.

I took out all the bullets from my revolver: the nine bullets in the cylinder, and the lead ball inside the barrel protruding from the cylinder's center. I put all of these in my pocket. So that Toto would not notice my presence, I waded through the grass silently, and approached.

Toto has finished bathing, and turned behind to reach her folded clothes. From the bushes on the opposite side of the river, I jumped out while aiming at Toto with the empty revolver. I've already decided what I would say to her first. 'If you don't dodge, you'll get hit! If you dodge, I'll hit you!'

"If you don't dodge——"

As I began to speak, I suddenly felt as if someone smacked my chest hard. At the same time, Toto turned towards my direction, and I saw her right hand reaching straight towards me. That hand, for some reason, is wrapped in a white haze. It's strange; I couldn't hear anything.

In the next moment, my vision suddenly turned pitch black.

Why? I can't see anyth——

I d ed

T can't

Toto

eh?

From the holster hidden underneath the folded clothes, Kino pulled out a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol), and fired as she turned around. It was a high-caliber revolver with an octagonal barrel, which Kino called by the name 'Canon'. The bullet did not miss its aim. It pierced the man's chest, destroying his heart. Another bullet quickly followed

and entered through the man’s mouth, penetrating his upper jaw and reaching the brain.

The two shots thundered in the forest, making the birds leave their nests. The dead man, still aiming at Kino , splashed up water ostentatiously as he fell into the river .

Kino wiped her body and dressed up. She put on her pants and boots and put on a long black vest on top of her white shirt. She then tightened the belt on her waist, and attached Canon’s holster on her right thigh.

Behind the bushes near the bank was a luggage-laden motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). It called out to Kino in a loud voice.

“Are you okay?”

Kino replied with a voice just as loud. “Yeah, I wasn’t shot.”

“That’s great then.”

Kino walked to the motorrad’s spot. “Sorry for making you wait, Hermes.”

The motorrad called Hermes spoke in a suspicious tone. "I wonder if he's a highwayman. But if that's the case, it's really strange for him to be alone."

"I thought he was just a peeping-tom, but… I was really surprised when he suddenly aimed his persuader at me."

"Even so, Kino. Why would there be a person in a place like this? Well, except for you that is," Hermes asked.

"He's probably headed to that place," Kino said as she looked at the gray walls, her eyes narrowing a little.

Hermes asked once more, "What would he do there? That place is just full of skeletons."

Kino gave a slight nod, "Who knows?"

"That country was disappointing," Hermes said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Yeah… An epidemic, I'm sure it's something like that ," Kino muttered as she fetched out a small wooden case from the box attached on Hermes' rear wheel.

"Everyone's annihilated?"

"There's no doubt about it. From the state of bone decomposition, it probably happened more than two years ago."

"Ooh…" An impressed voice leaked from Hermes. Then all of a sudden, he spoke excitedly, "Yes, that's it! Kino, that guy was a grave robber. He must be after gold and silver treasures, and makes a living as a 'yeager' or a 'hunter'. He must have thought that you were a rival, so he suddenly tried to kill you."

"That may, or may not be the case," said Kino, while filling Cannon with liquid gunpowder and bullets from the wooden case.

After putting away the wooden box, Kino took out a small mirror. She looked at her face and head, then pinched her bangs a little with her free hand.

"Did I cut it too much? What do you think, Hermes?"

"It's not bad," Hermes said without any interest. Kino put away the mirror just as indifferently.

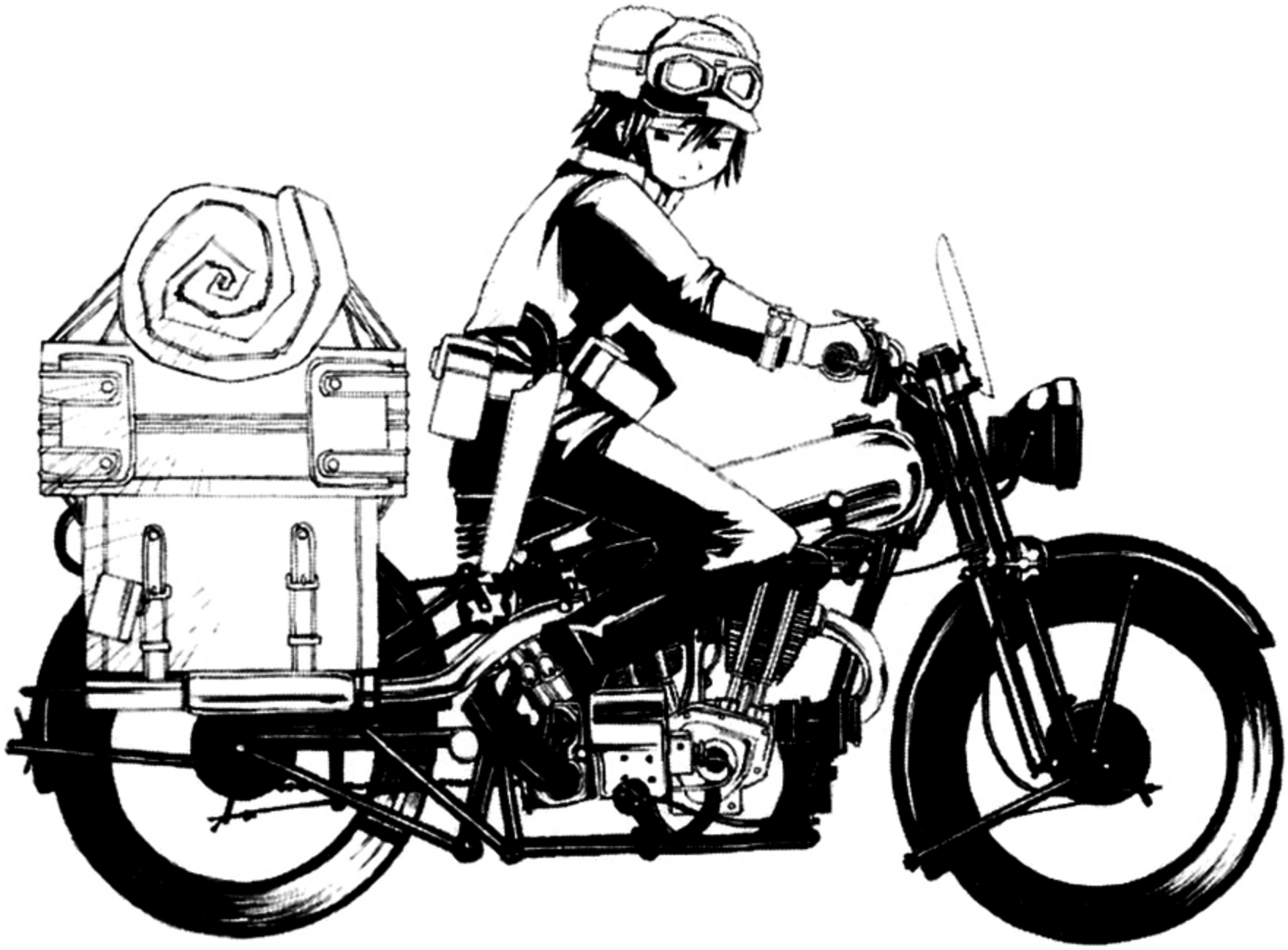
Kino put on her hat and strapped her goggles on. Then she started Hermes' engine.

"Well, shall we go Hermes? I hope this time we end up in a country with living people. And safe, to boot."

"Yeah!"

The motorrad sped away into the forest.

With the man still prone on it, the river continued to flow.



“Land of Books”[5] —Nothing Is Written!—

Chapter Seven

"Land of Books"

— Nothing Is Written! —

"A citizen card? But I'm not a resident of this country."

"……? Oh, you're a traveler? You must be the one who came riding a motorrad this morning."

"Yes, that's right."

"But you didn't bring a book with you."

"Excuse me?"

"Ah no, never mind, I'm sorry…. Well, do you want to borrow a book here?"

"Yes… can I?"

"Let's see… your name is?"

"Kino."

"Miss Kino, where are you staying right now?"

"A hotel around that corner. As for the name… I'm sorry, I forgot. It's the one with the blue roof."

"That's fine, I understand. How long are you planning to stay in this country?"

"The day after tomorrow. I'll return the books by tomorrow."

"If that's the case, then it should be fine. I'll make you a borrowing card, so please put your name and signature over here. You don't have to fill in the address and social security number."

"Yes. ……. Here it is."

"Thank you very much. I'll input this in our records, so please wait for a while."

"Sure, thanks."

"……. By the way, if you don't mind telling me, what are your impressions about our country so far, Miss Kino ?"

"…Books. I was really surprised with the amount of books here."

"Isn't it?! In our country, there is nothing more popular than reading books. The people in this country read all the time except when they're sleeping. I don't know about other countries, but I believe our country

won't lose in terms of the number of libraries and bookstores."

"That may be true. At least among all of the countries I 've seen up to now, only this country has lots of impressive libraries in each and every corner."

"By all means, indulge yourself with reading during your stay. There's nothing more enriching than reading books. …Here is your card. Tomorrow we'll be open from five in the morning until midnight. If you can't return it by then, just drop it in the return box by the entrance."

"Got it. Thank you very much——"

—

"Hermes! Are you awake?"

"**Mumbles**"

"Hermes?"

"Ah, you want to send a telegram? Roger."

"…Wha—? You're still half-asleep. He—llo?"

"Ah? Uh… oh, it's just Kino."

"Let's return to the hotel, Hermes. It's going to be dark soon."

"It's that time already…? By the way, what was that heavy stuff you loaded on me just now? Did you buy some explosives?"

"It's just the books that I borrowed."

"Huh?"

"I'll take them to the hotel room and read before I sleep."

"You're going to read again? Kino, weren't you in the library since morning?"

"Well, it's not a bad idea to do this from time to time. And now that I feel like it, maybe I'm going to do the same tomorrow too."

"……"

"Why not come with me, Hermes? Let's go library-hopping."

"…Motorrads were not meant to fly, nor read books. Not that I'm jealous. Hmph——"

—

"Good morning, Kino. I woke up the same time you did. On the dot. I was quite surprised at myself."

"Good morning, Hermes. You waking up the same time as me… that's rare."

"Well, it's only because I had a good afternoon sleep yesterday. I didn't have to sleep that much last night. I'll probably be able to sleep this afternoon too."

"I see… Say, Hermes. Was I saying anything while I was asleep? I had a weird dream."

"Ooh, it's rare for you to have a dream, Kino. What sort of dream? Tell me before you forget about it. You weren't talking in your sleep."

"Well, it's like this… I was lost in a dark yet somewhat bright place, but for some reason, it's very familiar. I couldn't tell whether it's in the past or future. I don't know why, but I was being chased by a white wolf. Apparently, a person who looks like me stole something valuable. There was a red-eyed witch by my side, always attending to me, healing my wounds and singing a relaxing lullaby from time to time."

"……"

"After a while, I found myself drinking tea leisurely with that witch. Then, we had a quiet walk in the middle of a snowy plain. However, a child came out saying some naughty things and the witch dragged him off. The child died. The next day, the witch's head was gone, and I was sad. And then, the white wolf transformed into a gorgeous woman. She told me to come with her. And I came along without thinking."

"……. Kino, what sort of weird books were you reading yesterday?"

—

“——Miss traveler, how was it?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“About that book you returned in that wagon. You’ve read all of it, haven’t you?”

“Ah, yes…. It was interesting.”

“What else?”

“What else?”

“Yes. There must be something else you can say. For instance, as to whether it was nicely written or if the feelings of the characters were portrayed well. I would really like to know what a traveler thinks about it. You must have a different point of view from a person who was born in and grew up here.”

"Even if you say that… it's hard to give an opinion right off the bat."

"I see… As for me, I would give that book 69 points. Of course, the perfect score is 100."

"Uh… huh…"

"The main character was well-written. However, the influence of the supporting characters to the protagonist was quite weak. If only it cleared that criterion, I would have given it a higher score."

"So it's like that, huh…"

"This author is very thorough when it comes to describing action scenes. I could almost hear the main character's kick cutting through the air. That aspect was very well done. On the other hand, his descriptions of nature are always vague; phrases like 'blue sky, flowing clouds' were used thirteen times in the first half of the story. It makes the reader lose interest."

"……"

"Wait a minute! What are you saying? That was the author's distinctive style. He probably thinks that his work doesn't need superfluous descriptions. You haven't analyzed his style well enough."

"Oh? Well, how would you assess his work then?"

"I give it 92 points! Without a doubt, it was this author 's greatest piece of work."

"Really now? You must have a good reason to say that with so much confidence."

"U-uhmm…"

"Why, of course! You noticed it yourself, haven't you? The abundant presence of action scenes. But that's not all . This author's depiction of the protagonist's grief about being obligated to fight for his life was really good."

"Oh! You sure paid attention to that point."

"…Uhm, it's about time for me to be on my way, if you'll excuse me…"

"Naturally! That point will not be put there by the author directly. If he were to say it explicitly, the reader, captivated merely by the action, will not care to think about anything else. The stuff you said about nature descriptions, etc. is correct. I agree with you. However, how much help would including descriptions like those in *'Let's Meet at Roult River'*[6] do?"

"Uh-huh. But wasn't there a need to tone down the tempo? *'Roll River'* was a cool choice, though."

"I'll be… going."

"Did you know? The author lost his father and uncle in a war when he was just a child. In *'Bobby and Lemons'*, he assimilated those feelings into the main character. In *'Brau Frau Brau'*, killing to survive combined with the idea of a female boxer was pretty disconcerting. The cold-hearted presentation of the nature of being caught up in a fight was an indication of the painful and sorrowful state of a human deep inside, though externally it may be perceived as simple, to aim towards something like that is——"

"——In short, to place something like that in his work ——"

"——The so-called *'Tendalens'* school of thinking authors aim for was something to the degree of *'Real, Moral and Neutral'*. This thesis——"

"——As I thought, when the important supporting character died in such a commotion, they——"

"——That was a technique to explore the *root* of being a mother——"

"——I see… I'm beginning to agree with you. Wow, you really read into it very well."

"It was no big deal."

"Now that I recall, miss trave… huh? She's not here."

"Have you read *'Relter · Tensun · Rojijiko Nerusare'*? That one will get over 80 points, without a doubt."

"Yes, I have. I give it an undisputed 89 points. The essential part was the bed scene in the second chapter, don't you agree? That was a homage to *'Wheels Only*

Turn'. Though that scene was indeed necessary for the author to become a more mature writer, the truth is, he just really wanted to write it. This can also be seen in *' Package Nineteen'* and his first masterpiece, *'Gravity Breaking a Window in Forty-Five Years'*."

"Oh. That's also a great way to read into it. Have you read *'Bolt Up ~Three-Forked Road of Destiny~'*?"

"Of course! I gave it about 88 points. That was the best among the abridged works."

"What about *'Kelistoneltones'*? A must-read."

"Five years ago. I read it together with *'Lulutoneltones'*. Well, have you tried *'So Said the Lamb'*?"

"Why of course. What about *'Tomomma Redeyatsui ~My Love Song~'*?"

"It inspired an entire generation. Of course, I've read it . What about——"

"——More free time… Hmm?"

"…I see. So the luggage is piled up on top and on both sides… and this one is——"

"Hey! Are you a motorrad thief?"

"Ah! N-no… Uhm, I-I'm just…"

"Hello!"

"Aaah!"

"Yo, Kino. You're early."

"Because I saw you from inside."

"U-uhm…"

"Mister thief, let me introduce you to Kino."

"Hello. Sorry for surprising you. This is Hermes. Well, if you're planning to steal Hermes, I'll have to stop you. I 'll be in trouble, you see."

"N-no. I just approached a little bit to look closer. I'm sorry for creating a misunderstanding."

"That's it?"

"Are you interested in motorrads?"

"No… Well, maybe… I thought you could travel with it."

"Travel?"

"Yeah. I am interested in traveling…"

"It can certainly be used for traveling. That is, if you know how to ride a motorrad."

"…No, that's impossible. I can't even ride a bicycle. If you'll excuse me…"

"Uhm, wait."

"Yes?"

"That's unusual. Were you possibly thinking of leaving this country?"

"Y-yes. That's right."

"Ah, could it be that you have a *big*, *big*, *big* hatred towards books?"

"No. I love books. By that alone, there's nothing more wonderful than this country. You can read all sorts of books here, you see."

"That's it?"

"That's true. I too, like it. …Even so, you still want to travel?"

"…Yes. …M-miss Kino. Do you have time? Will you listen to my story?"

"I do. Certainly, I'll listen——"

—

"The truth is… it is my dream to someday have my own book published. I want everyone to read what I have written. That's why I want to go on a journey."

"Eh? Can't you do that here?"

"That's correct."

"Why?"

"Miss Kino, Hermes. I guess you don't know… it's possible, but in this country, there's not a single person who would think of writing something on his own. That is because what they enjoy most is reading. And so, there are neither publishers nor printing presses here."

"Then where did all those books came from?"

"Several times a year, traders from the so-called ' bookstores' would buy up books here and there on wholesale. Everything was brought in from outside, not a single one was made from this country."

"Oh."

"I'm surprised."

"I've… loved fantasy ever since I was a child. I enjoy the solitary activity of imagining all sorts of dialogues in my head and conjuring up my own characters. For instance, before going to bed, or when I was supposedly listening to the teacher's lectures in class."

"I know what you mean."

"I don't."

"It was also like that when I read books. While I'm enjoying a book, there are moments when my fantasies will be triggered. I think that's what you call 'ideas running wildly'. It was as if, in the middle of reading, I would run and jump into another boat, take the rudder suddenly and change its direction. It would gradually turn into a fantasy story of my own. It's really fun. There are times when I get lost in my fantasy world, and couldn't continue reading the book."

"It happens to me too."

"Nuh-uh."

"I couldn't be satisfied with all of those remaining as mere imaginings. Those fantasies, my stories, I want them to remain. I want them to be passed on in written form. I began to have such thoughts. I want them to be read and known by someone. I want those things that moved me to move others. I want someone to enjoy the things that I enjoy."

"I get your drift."

"…No comment."

"These feelings got stronger each day. That which holds my feelings inside would overflow each time I read a book. In this country, there are many books written by other people. These books are interesting and I love to read them, but this time, I want to try writing my very own book. I am tempted to tell them of my own story every time I hear them talking about something interesting. I don't know whether it's a feeling of competitiveness because I know that my story is better or a feeling of jealousy and frustration because they don't know about it. Maybe it's both."

"Uh-huh, go on."

"I want to publish my own book. That is my dream…. But I am the only one who would think of such a thing in this country. Maybe I'm an oddball. Everybody else would say something like, 'There are already many books to read in this country, and it's fun to criticize and award points depending on how much you enjoyed them , so why bother writing your own book?' Once my friend also said this to my face: 'Writing? Why would you want to do such a thing?'"

"……"

"……"

"But I couldn't help it. Within me, there's something that urges me to write… There's this thirst that has to be satisfied."

"And so, you would face the dangers and hardships of traveling for that sake."

"Exactly! If I can't do it here, maybe I can do it somewhere else. Maybe I could grab hold of a chance somewhere! Maybe there's a person or a publishing company who would approve of my work! …But, the

thing is, I know next to nothing when it comes to traveling. Like I told you before, I don't even know how to ride a bike."

"……. If that's the case…"

"Yes?"

"If that's the case, then you have no choice but to remain here. Even if you give up your dream, staying in this country and reading books for the rest of your life is not a bad deal at all, in my opinion. You can think of it as your fate. At least, you can go on living without risking your life."

"……. I see… to stay here forever. Then all of my fantasies would vanish… no, eventually, I would even forget how to imagine, and live on——"

"……"

"……"

"Hahaha! There's a way! For some reason, I just saw a part of my future right now before my eyes! It was like a near-death experience. It was so vivid!"

"I see, so it's possible for you to imagine your future."

"That's right! I could imagine my own life. Like a story in a book. All I need to do is to read that story."

"Yeah."

"And I can imagine very well. My own fate is not like the library bookshelves, carefully divided into different genres! Nothing yet! Nothing is written!"

"……"

"……"

"Thank you very much for listening to me. I'll think about my future one more time."

"I see. But don't think too much. There's no end to thoughts."

"Kino's right. Like they say, 'When an inept person thinks, he grins in his sleep.'"

"Huh?"

"…'When an inept person thinks, *it's as if he's asleep*'?"

"Yeah, that's it…"

—

"Good morning, Hermes."

"**Yaaaawn** Good morning. …Ah? Huh? Are we leaving already?"

"Yeah."

"It's still so early."

"It's okay. I've eaten breakfast already. I've also prepared the stuff we need."

"That's not it. I thought you wanted to read books up to the last minute."

"Nope. Reading is fun, indeed. But we don't see countries just for that. Other than the books, this country is pretty boring."

"Uh-huh…. Well, I'm ready to ride whenever. The weather today is great too."

—

"…Here. The departure procedures are done. Thank you for staying with us. Please be careful and have a nice trip."

"Thank you very much."

"Thanks."

"Well, shall we go now, Hermes?"

"A'right——"

—

"Kino, there's somebody beyond that curve. He's carrying some big luggage."

"That is… the person we met yesterday. Stop——"

—

"Good morning, Miss Kino, Hermes!"

"Good morning."

"Morning."

"I know the road right ahead. Would you like to go together until that place?"

"It's fine with me. What about you Hermes? Is it okay if I stop your engine? I'll push you for a while."

"Sure, do as you like."

—

"To tell you the truth, I was really surprised to see you outside the country."

"Yeah. I was also surprised. Though it's only by chance, I was really glad we bumped into each other…. As you can see, I have decided to go on a journey from here on."

"It sure seems like it…. Did something happen?"

"I told my parents about what I was thinking, but then they told me, 'Even though you're living a *perfect* life here, why were you having such stupid thoughts? It's futile no matter what you do,' and they restrained me by force. And so, I made a little promise with them: 'I understand. Father, Mother, I'll stop thinking about these things,' and left early this morning."

"Way to go!"

"Then that promise is a 'work of fiction'."

"Hahaha, that's right. But, when I was about to leave a while ago, I met my friends lined up in front of the library. They spoke to me."

"What did they say?"

"'Even though you're leaving, this place is still the best . We'll stay here forever. If ever you change your mind, come home. It would be nice to see you again.'"

"…I see."

"I told them, 'The next time we meet, even if I'm nearby and right in front of you, I will not listen to you. I don't care what you tell me, or how many points you give me, I will not respond.'"

"……"

"What's so funny, Kino?"

"Ah, nothing."

"In the end, none of them told me to have a nice trip…. Well, that's okay."

"……. How in the world do you intend to travel?"

"Now that you mention it."

"I was thinking about that yesterday. I can't drive a car or a bicycle. But, I realized there must be at least one way for me to go to places — I can walk with my two legs. Besides, I was pretty good with skiing a long time ago. And so, for now, I will travel by walking. I'll go south where snow must be falling soon, and go skiing from there. It will take a long time. But for me, this is the best way. I don't know where my travels will lead me, or if I would arrive anywhere at all."

"I see… It's good to have that resolve."

"That's a pretty big luggage. What's inside?"

"The long ones at the side are my skis. I'll use this backpack as the sled. Inside are some clothes and portable rations. But most of it is paper. Half contains what I have written until now, and the rest are for what I will be writing in the future."

"Oh…"

"Do you have a persuader with you?"

"Yes. I took the lightest one in our house without asking for permission. It's this here."

"Ooh. Well, Kino. What's this?"

"It's a 2340 model attached with laser sight. If it's this type, you probably won't have any problem with bullets. But you should always keep as much ammunition as food. Also, be ready to fire anytime. Disassemble and clean it every day."

"…I understand. I'll take care of it."

"There's one more important thing."

"Yes?"

"Whenever you fire, do not waver; whether you're shooting at an animal that you would eat, or would eat you. At all times, it's not the survival of other living things, but your own, that should become your priority …. Remember, a corpse cannot hold a pen."

"…I understand. I won't forget that."

—

"——The leaves are already falling."

"Yeah. It's going to be cold soon——"

—

"We'll go our separate ways from here. I will walk along the forest to the south."

"Is that so? …Take care."

"You too."

"Thank you very much. …Miss Kino!"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what will happen from here. But if I happen to survive this winter… I will probably return to my home country to cheer myself up."

"…That's a good idea."

"Thank you for everything. I'm really glad to have met you. Well then——"

"Have a nice trip."

"Have a nice trip."

"……! Miss Kino, Hermes…"

"Yes?"

"Yep?"

"I'm off!"

—

"——After we pass that mountain, we'll be going through a road heading northwest. After that we should see a wide highway."

"Okay, I got the route. …By the way, Kino."

"Hmm?"

"Do you think… things will turn out well for that guy?"

"……"

"Well?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Why?"

"It would be nice if you could make a wish come true on your own; especially if it's something that would take at least ten people to accomplish. That's why I don't think things will turn out well."

"……"

"Chances are it's going to be like that."

"…Oh, well. Anyway, what you told him earlier was the same as what Master told you long ago."

"That's true. And so——"

“A Kind Land”[7] —Tomorrow Never Comes.—

Chapter Eight

"A Kind Land"

— Tomorrow Never Comes. —

The earth was an assortment of colors.

The mountains were comprised of numerous, gently sloping highlands. Its summit, valleys, and spurs were all buried under forests rich in plant life. The yellow and crimson mingled with the thick green color of the leaves, creating a mosaic pattern.

A light blue color pervaded the high, almost transparent sky. There was not a single cloud in it.

And amidst the various trees in the forests shedding their autumn foliage was a lone road.

The road of packed earth was softly canopied with fallen leaves. It sewed its way through the mountain in repeating, up and down curves.

On this path ran a single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). The fallen leaves danced away as though disturbed by waves caused by a passing ship. The motorrad slowly traced its path through the road that was abound with curves.

The rider of the motorrad was around her mid-teens. She had big eyes and a fearless expression on her face.

She was dressed in a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs, and had on a brimmed hat with ear flaps, fixed by the band of her goggles so it would not get blown away by the wind.

Behind her seat was a carrier rack, on which a big bag was tied. Below it was the rear wheel flanked by two boxes.

"To be honest, Hermes," the rider broke the silence as she rode. "The place we're heading to has a bit… no, has a pretty bad reputation among travelers."

"Really?" the motorrad called Hermes replied, rather surprised.

"I was told before: 'It's not just unsociability, it's pure coldness towards outsiders,' or 'The concept of ' hospitality' doesn't exist in that country,' or 'No matter how hard I try, I couldn't think of it as a good place,' or ' They're probably under the impression that they are the greatest.'"

"……"

"'You'll get sick of their unfriendliness,' or 'The children will throw stones at you,' or 'The stores put the

shutters up when a traveler comes, or tell you that they're out of stock,' or 'There's nothing but terrible food,' or 'Be careful you don't get overcharged.'"

"……"

"'They make you wait for one day before they let you in,' or 'They believe that all travelers are bad,' or 'They won't even point you to a hotel; you're better off camping out,' or 'I don't want to get near that country ever again,' or 'That kind of country should disappear!'"

"……"

"When I told them I'd like to go see it, they all advised me to stop."

A light smile drifted on the rider's lips as she finished. Then Hermes asked, unable to hide his shock, "…And yet you would still go, Kino? Even though there are other roads to choose from? Even if you're free to decide?"

The rider called Kino answered with a smile. "That's exactly why. I'm really interested to know what kind of country would get that much bad-mouthing. Besides, things may be a little better now."

"Okay. What if there's no change at all?"

"That's fine. We can complain about it once we're out of the country," Kino said decisively.

"Well, I suppose so," Hermes muttered.

Eventually, the road became rugged and winding. The path running up the mountain turned into repetitive steep curves.

When Kino looked below, she could clearly see the road they have run through, bordered by the trees.

Soon the road reached its peak. Kino stopped Hermes.

The road beyond the spur becomes downhill. On the right, the ridge lines culminate into the mountain summit . A magnificent U-shaped valley stretched up to the spur of the other side of the mountain. Within it, a country surrounded by round, gray walls could be seen vaguely.

"The view sure is nice," Hermes expressed his admiration.

"Yeah. But from here we can't tell if the hearts of the people living there is just as beautiful."

"Right. Well, let's go. It may turn out to be very memorable; a country you wouldn't forget for the rest of your life," Hermes teased, and Kino smiled.

"That would be great."

The motorrad descended the gentle slopes.

—

Right before the tightly shut gates, several soldiers carrying long, rifle-type persuaders (Note: A gun) were waiting for Kino and Hermes.

Kino muttered as she slowed down. "Let's see if they'll let us in easily."

"What will you do if they don't, Kino?"

Kino stopped in front of the gate. She cut the engine and dismounted Hermes. While taking off her goggles, Kino approached the guards, who were scrutinizing Kino and Hermes with stern expressions.

When Kino was about to say her greetings,

"How many days are you planning to spend here?" A brusque question suddenly came from one of the soldiers .

"Oh, just as the rumors say?" Hermes muttered out of earshot.

"Three days. That is, I would like to stay until the day after tomorrow."

With Kino's reply, the tension from the soldier's faces disappeared, replaced by a calm smile. They looked at each other for a moment. Then they stood in attention and saluted to Kino and Hermes with flawless gestures.

The one who seemed to be their commanding officer spoke with utmost courtesy. "We welcome you to our country. Your visit greatly honors us."

“……”

Kino was stunned for a moment, then took off her hat. “Good day. I am Kino, and this here is Hermes,” Kino greeted, and at last the soldiers lowered their hands.

“Miss Kino, Hermes, come this way please.”

The commanding officer guided Kino and Hermes not towards the guardroom, but to the gate. Kino, who was again taken by surprise, asked, “What about the immigration procedures? Like inspecting my things, or something?”

“It’s not necessary. We consider that very rude, and will only be done if you are actually suspected of a crime, ” the officer said, still smiling. One of the soldiers entered the guardroom, and soon, the gate slowly rose. “Please go ahead. We have to stay outside the gates because of our duties. There should be someone waiting inside, so don’t hesitate to ask anything there.”

With the saluting soldiers behind, Kino pushed Hermes along and passed through the thick walls.

Hermes began, "That was a bit disappointing. Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?"

"Nope, that can't be," Kino denied. The inner gates began to open before their eyes.

Upon passing through the inner gates, Kino and Hermes came out to the town's main street.

Right in front of the gates was a park where several people have gathered. When they saw Kino, they gave her a warm welcome and expressed their appreciation for her visit.

More and more people gathered as Kino replied to their greetings, and soon, Kino and Hermes became the center of a throng of people. All of them were smiling, uttering words of welcome simultaneously. As for people who glared, or throw stones, there were none.

With a repressed exclamation, Hermes spoke so that only Kino would hear. "We've come to a different country! I'm sure of it!"

"That can't be… probably." Kino paused, and addressed the crowd. "Thank you very much. I was not expecting such a big welcome, so I'm a bit surprised. But um… there's something I would like to ask."

Everybody hushed to catch what Kino was going to say. With a nervous tone, Kino asked whether they knew a hotel with a shower and space for Hermes inside; one that doesn't charge so much.

The people began to argue among themselves as to which place would suit Kino's criteria. At that moment, a girl's voice was heard from the back of the assembly.

"Our place is like that!"

The crowd parted, and a girl quickly came up front. She was around eleven or twelve, with short hair and big eyes.

The people stopped arguing, and focused their attention on the girl. The girl gave a springy bow, and introduced herself to Kino. "Hello, miss traveler. I'm Sakura."

"Hi there. I'm Kino, and this here is my partner, Hermes," Kino replied with a smile, and Hermes greeted with a 'hello'.

Sakura looked straight at Kino, clasped her hands in front of her, and asked, "My parents run a hotel just over there. I'm sure you'll like it. What do you say?"

Kino was surprised, and her expression clouded for a moment.

"Please be our guide."

"Yeah. We'll leave it to you."

Hearing Kino and Hermes' replies, Sakura smiled and nodded energetically.

"Sure!"

—

With Sakura's guidance, Kino walked, pushing Hermes beside her.

Along the way, she took off her jacket and hung it on Hermes' carrier. Kino wore a black jacket fastened with a belt on the waist. On her right thigh was a holster containing the revolver-type hand persuader she called ' Canon'.

"Say, Miss Kino," Sakura looked up at Kino and began a conversation.

"Hm?"

"Isn't the name 'Kino' wonderful? It's short, sounds nice, and easy to pronounce."

"Thanks. I also thought that way a long time ago."

Kino's reply made Sakura look puzzled. "A long time ago? What about now?"

Kino laughed and turned her gaze towards Sakura.

"I still think so. It's a nice name after all. But 'Sakura' also sounds good, what does it mean?"

Sakura replied, looking embarrassed, "It's the name of a flower that blooms in spring. It's a pretty flower with a pink color."

"Oh…" was Kino's short response. This time, Sakura slightly pouted.

"But you know, my friends always make fun of me and call me names like *'Nekura'* or *'Okura'*. It's so annoying."[8]

"……"

Kino fell silent and her eyes stared into space.

"What's wrong, Kino?" Hermes asked, and Kino gave a quick reply.

"Nothing." Then added, "It's not something I can explain."

Kino and Hermes soon arrived at the hotel.

It was not too big, but it was thoroughly clean inside and out.

The young couple at the front desk greeted Kino and Hermes. "Welcome. It's really been a long time since we had visitors from outside the country."

"These are my parents. They manage this hotel, and also serve as the tour guides for this area. And I am their apprentice," Sakura said. Kino bowed with a smile and introduced Hermes.

"Let's see, what room would you like?" As Sakura's mother asked Kino, Sakura nimbly looked into the ledger and suggested, "Is that ground floor room with the wide door available?" Her mother nodded. "Then let's give them that room so that Hermes can go in and out easily."

Sakura led Kino and Hermes to the room. Just as she said, it has plenty of space for Hermes to go through, and convenient, for they need not change direction when

going out, as it has another door that they could use. When Sakura asked about her impression of the room, Kino replied that it was more than satisfactory.

“It’s almost lunch, so please go to the dining hall. It’s at the right side of the front desk, a door with a big berry drawn on it.”

“Thank you. I’ll follow right away.”

After Sakura left, Hermes spoke to Kino who was taking down the luggage from the carrier. “It’s very different from the rumors.”

“You bet. I was surprised, too.”

Hermes dropped his tone a little, and spoke seriously. “Say, Kino. What if after this good service, their treatment suddenly becomes completely the opposite. With that gap, the traveler will hit rock bottom out of frustration.

“I wonder if they would make such an elaborate scheme…. Well, that’s fine. I’ll go eat lunch. After that, let’s go around the town. Maybe it’s just as you say, Hermes,” Kino said with a wry smile, and left the room.

—

After a delicious lunch, Sakura offered her services as a tour guide for free, which Kino accepted appreciatively.

Kino removed the boxes on either side of Hermes' rear wheel. Then she asked Sakura for a cushion and laid it out on top of the carrier rack to make an instant back seat .

Sakura sat on the back seat sideways. Kino told her to tightly hold on to her waist while they ride, but warned her not to touch Canon on her right thigh.

Kino first asked Sakura to take them to a place where a mechanic could do a check-up on Hermes.

The middle-aged mechanic accepted Kino's request right away. He checked Hermes from tip to toe, and soon located the parts that were heavily worn-out, damaged, or in bad condition.

"Hmm? What happened here?" The mechanic asked Kino about the cracked nut beside Hermes' engine.

In fear of Kino dodging the question out of embarrassment, Hermes spoke in her stead. "Kino fired at it with her persuader. Because it wouldn't come off."

"Fired?"

"The nut got stuck and wouldn't come off no matter what she did, so using her persuader with reduced gunpowder, Kino fired at the edge of the hardened putty holding the nut in place. I told her to leave it alone though."

The appalled mechanic turned to Kino and gave her a sour look. "Miss traveler… that's some heroic effort, but I can't praise you for it."

"I suppose you're right… I'm sorry," Kino apologized.

"Mister, scold her a bit more," Hermes said half-jokingly.

Soon the mechanic smiled with his oil-smeared face. " It seems like it will take some time to fix him. Miss

traveler, please have some tea with Sakura while waiting. Now, shall we go Hermes?"

"I'll leave it to you!" Hermes readily consented as though nothing could make him happier.

Kino and Sakura drank their tea while seated on a bench in front of the mechanic's shop. The warm sun in the clear sky watched over them.

"He must be a skilled mechanic. It's rare for Hermes to happily agree to get fixed, you know."

Hearing Kino's comment, Sakura, who was seated beside her, looked up at her and replied with delight, "I' m glad."

Kino added, "And he had no qualms about scolding his client, either." Sakura giggled.

"The tea's delicious too." As Kino remarked, a car passed in front, and through the window, a resident smiled and waved to her.

"Miss traveler, welcome to our country!"

—

On the second morning, Kino woke up at dawn.

Kino left the soundly sleeping Hermes, who was fixed until he's good as new, inside the room. She went out of the hotel and went into a small public park nearby. There were no clouds in the clear sky. The peak of the towering mountain on the northern side of the town could be seen very well.

Kino performed her usual workout, from simple exercises to her combat skills. Afterwards, she practiced her quick draw with an unloaded Canon.

As Kino was wiping off her sweat, a man who was jogging approached her. He greeted Kino with a smile, and Kino greeted back. The man asked Kino of her impressions of the country.

Kino truthfully answered that it was completely different from the rumors she had heard. The man smiled bitterly upon hearing her answer, "Is that so? It was really terrible in the past, you see."

The man pointed at Canon and asked if she had it repaired recently. When Kino shook her head, the man told her about a skilled persuader smith at the southern part of the town, and that it would be great if she could check it out. Then he drew a simple map on the ground.

When Kino thanked him,

"As compared to you dropping by our country, it's not a big deal at all," the man said and left with a wave of the hand and a smile.

"The persuader smith at the southern district? Okay. You know, the park at the southern district is beautiful."

After breakfast, Kino asked Sakura to be her guide once more, and Sakura readily agreed. When Kino thanked her, Sakura proudly declared,

"It's the job of a tour guide to make sure that the guests are satisfied."

—

Just as the day before, the two rode Hermes and headed for the tiny store near the southern walls. With a loud voice, Sakura asked if there was anybody home. After a while, a grumpy-looking old man came out from the interior of the shop.

"I'm closed today… no, I'm closed tomorrow, too. Come back the day after tomorrow." The persuader smith, who seemed to have been disturbed in the middle of his sleep, said coldly.

"This is Miss Kino. She's a traveler. She's going to stay until tomorrow only, so can you please fix her persuader ?" Sakura said.

The persuader smith was surprised. "A traveler?"

Sakura nodded. The persuader smith glanced at Kino and asked curtly, "Where is it?"

Kino took out Canon from its holster with a complicated expression. The persuader smith lightly waved his fingers for Kino to hand it over. When he held it, he stared at it with a sharp expression for a while, and muttered,

"…Oh, I see. Let me tinker with this thing, will you?"

The persuader smith demanded Kino to hand over its accessories. Kino thanked him and passed him Canon's empty cylinders and spare parts.

“The gutter have seen much use, so I’ll have to check the frame. I may have to change parts so it will take a while. Around afternoon, I guess. It’s a good idea to go to the public park for a while. There’s a festival there right now.”

As the persuader smith spoke, he gently took one of the persuaders hanging from the wall. He handed a .45 caliber double-action revolver with a semi-circular clip, as well as several bullets, to Kino.

“This is a replacement. You will have no need for it in this country, but it can serve as a weight. Wear this for a while.”

The traveler, motorrad, and girl left the store expressing their gratitude. The old man glimpsed at the hand persuader passed to him. In the empty store, he muttered ,

“What a surprise… You’ve lived a long life.”[9]

—

There was a large park in a place not too far away from the shop. Inside, there was a forest with a variety of trees left as they were, as well as a beautiful swamp and pond. There were several simple houses made from wood, where children played.

One corner of the park was made into an open-air theater where a lot of people have gathered.

A play was being held in the theater when Kino, Hermes, and Sakura arrived. Sakura explained that the townspeople performed in this play to teach the children the history of their country.

When Kino said that she has great interest in history, Sakura invited her to watch.

Two humans and one motorrad made their way to the end of the line. When the person before them recognized Kino as the traveler, he offered to vacate his position to

let them get ahead. The next person also turned over his position, and the next one also gave up his seat with a smile. After thanking one person after another, Kino, Hermes, and Sakura eventually ended up in a guest seat where they can view the play best.

Kino took the seat somewhat apologetically and propped Hermes on his stand. The play has already started. When Kino was about to catch up to the story, the narrator at the side of the stage suddenly exclaimed.

"W-wait a moment! …Oh, sorry. But hold it! You seated over there, could you be the traveler that arrived yesterday?"

The people on stage and the audience looked at Kino all at once. Sakura stood up and replied, "That's right! She decided just now that she wanted to see the play! I'm her guide."

The surrounding adults cheered and clapped their hands for some reason. Even the actors on the stage clapped their hands and hooted. The narrator continued, "Everyone! Since we just started the play, what about doing it from the top for the sake of miss traveler over here? She won't have a chance to see it again."

Around the dazed Kino and Hermes, the people could be heard saying things like, 'No complaints!' or 'That's a good idea!', and broke into applause once again. A young woman stood up, "Please watch out for my boy's acting this time, okay?! He's the third tree from the left side!" She shouted loudly, prompting everyone to laugh.

Kino stood up, looked all around her and bowed.

"All right! It's decided then!"

The narrator declared, and the actors started their preparations. Kino sat on the bench with a flop. "I was so surprised," she said as she looked at Sakura.

"Same here," Hermes said.

"Welcome to our country!" Sakura said as the play began.

The play explained the history of this country.

A long, long time ago, a group of people was persecuted and chased out of a distant country. They visited many different countries, but couldn’t find a place that would accept them.

After wandering for a long time, they got lost deep inside a forest.

But the blessings of the forest saved the lives of the starving people. They decided to create a new country in this forest, where no one would hate them.

And time passed by like a flowing river.

“And now, here I am. At the head of that current,” Sakura said in a whisper, amidst the applause of the crowd.

—

“Miss traveler, please join us for lunch.”

Kino was overwhelmed with numerous requests like this. In the end, they joined the members of the play in its closing party.

At the barbecue stand in the park, Kino asked if there was anything she could help with, and was given the role of starting the fire. After Kino handled the job in no time, she was then given the task of grilling. After awkwardly wearing the apron handed to her, she skillfully grilled dozens of skewered meat.

Hermes muttered while looking at Kino doing these things. "She actually looks like she's having fun."

After the party, Kino looked back at the park one more time, and returned to the persuader smith's shop.

"It's done."

The persuader smith lifted his face and stood up from his chair. He took the cloth-covered Canon placed on top of his work table. He looked at Kino with his creased, blue eyes. Then he handed it, still covered, to Kino, grip first.

"It's a very good persuader. You should treasure it."

"Thank you very much."

Kino took it, and to check if it's working well, she raised the hammer and pulled the trigger several times. Her expression changed.

"I'm surprised…. It's better than the first time I held it."

"Is that so," was the persuader smith's blunt reply.

"Thank you very much. How much do I owe you?"

"I don't need any."

"Huh?"

The persuader smith sat down, looked up at Kino, and asked, "You're good at persuaders aren't you, miss traveler?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"There's something I would like to ask you…"

"Yes?"

"Once there was a remarkable persuader marksman who made her students call her 'Master'. She was a traveler who would stick her neck into all kinds of trouble. Her skill stood out too much, and various countries would despise, and sometimes thank her for it. …That was a long time ago. If she's still alive now, she would be quite old."

"……"

"Miss traveler, do you know of such a person?"

Kino looked at Canon once and put it back to its holster. Then she looked straight at the persuader smith.

"No, I don't."

The persuader smith slowly smiled. "I see. Thank you. I don't need any payment. Moreover…"

He turned his chair around, grabbed a wooden box and held it out to Kino. "I want you to look at this."

"?"

Upon taking it, Kino opened the box and saw a hand persuader inside.

It was a slim, .22 caliber automatic with a square barrel that has a weight attached underneath.

It was made for a left-handed person, as its safety, slide stop, and magazine catch were all on the right side. Inside the box, there were reserve magazines and parts, a harmonica-shaped silencer and the silencer's slide lock, a special cleaning kit, holster, and other things.

"What a nice persuader. It's the first time I've seen this type," Kino said, and the persuader smith nodded.

"It's called 'Woodsman'. It's a .22 caliber model."

"Oh. It's such a valuable item." Kino expressed her admiration and was about to return the box when the persuader smith spoke,

"I want you to use it. Take it." Kino lifted her face in surprise. The old man explained gently, "A long time ago , when I was still a traveler, this was always on my hip. It protected my life time and again. But I haven't used it for decades now. I'm already old, and I could no longer travel… but this persuader still has a long way to go. It would be a pity to let it rot along with my body. I want it to go on a journey like before."

"Is that so… but…"

"Please take it."

"Um…"

"You'll take it, won't you?"

"…But I…"

"You'll *have* to take it."

"……. I understand. I'll treasure it."

Upon hearing this, a smile appeared on the persuader smith's face. It was as if he won the lottery. He suddenly stood up and exclaimed, "Yes! I knew it! Come here! I'll teach you how to use it. I'll let you tinker with the holster and the grip too. Come!" And then the old man, who did not seem like one at all, almost forcibly dragged Kino to an indoor shooting range.

At the store front, Sakura and Hermes were left alone, dumbfounded.

—

"I'll have to tell them that we'll be home late."

Sakura said and went to a nearby store to borrow a telephone. Kino and Hermes waited at one corner of the street. It has become dark, and the people on the street have thinned down.

"I didn't think he would let me fire like that," Kino muttered, holding a bag with a wooden box inside.

The persuader smith did not let Kino go until she fired three hundred rounds. During that time, he remodeled the holster so that it could be worn in the belt at the back. And at last, he sent off Kino, Sakura and Hermes out of the store with a satisfied look.

"Isn't that great? I had nothing but free time after all," Hermes snapped back.

"Well, sorry for keeping you waiting. But this time, it's not my fault."

"Hmph."

Kino lightly lifted the bag. "What will I do with this?"

"Aren't you gonna use it? After all that trouble."

"Simple to say. I wonder what Master would tell me if she sees me wearing a .22 caliber automatic?"

"She won't say anything. She'll shoot at you."

"……"

"*If* she sees you. It's okay as long as she doesn't," Hermes said without a care.

"You know, I always have this feeling that she would see me," Kino said.

"My condolences, then… By the way, why did you tell him you didn't know about Master?" Hermes asked.

Kino answered honestly, "Master told me to answer that way in case someone asked about her…"

"Oh I see. It's for your protection," Hermes said in admiration. Kino mused to no one in particular,

"I wonder what that person did in the past?"

Sakura came back.

"Miss Kino, I told my mom we'll be late for dinner."

"Thanks. Then, shall we go home?"

As Kino was about to start Hermes' engine, "Wait," Sakura interrupted, "Miss Kino, Hermes. Before we go home, there's a place I would like to take you to. I won't have any other chance. Is that okay?"

"Yes, I don't mind. What about you Hermes?"

"It's fine. What kind of place?"

"It's a very wonderful place!" was Sakura's only answer.

—

"Amazing."

"Pretty!"

Upon opening the door, Kino and Hermes exclaimed in admiration at the same time. Kino, Hermes and Sakura stood at the topmost part of the wall. Sakura guided

them to the workers' cabin beneath the walls, and rode the cargo elevator.

It was deep red.

The sun that has just set dyed the sky a deep red. It was a strong hue, almost transparent.

From afar, the line of peaks could be seen clearly. The sky began beyond it.

"This is my favorite place. I believe it's the most wonderful place in the world. Someday, if customers come, I will definitely guide them here. You are the first ones."

"It's an honor," Kino said as she kicked down Hermes' stand.

For a while, the two people and motorrad remained standing, gazing at the red sky.

Then Sakura broke the silence. "I want to follow my father and mother's footsteps, and become a great hotel manager and tour guide…. I wonder if I'll become one?"

“You will. No, you already are a wonderful tour guide . I’ve had lots of fun these two days,” Kino said with a smile.

“I agree. A wonderful country like this deserves a wonderful tour guide like you,” Hermes slightly put on airs. Sakura was a bit surprised, and replied awkwardly,

“Ehehe. Thank you, Miss Kino, Hermes.”

Kino sat on the walls and looked up at Sakura.

Sakura remained standing facing the evening sun, and told them, “I want to learn more, and become a wonderful tour guide. I want more and more travelers to come to this country where I was born, and create wonderful memories together for them to take home.” Then the girl looked at Kino with a carefree smile, “Isn’t it wonderful to be able to do that?”

Without removing her gaze from Sakura, Kino smiled and nodded several times. “Yeah. It’s such a wonderful job.”

Then she set her eyes on the red sky once more.

—

They returned to the hotel, and Kino ate dinner with Sakura. Hermes was in the room, asleep. After the delicious meal, Sakura's mother came with tea and cakes. When she asked if Sakura had been a trouble for them,

"Not at all. On the contrary, we had so much fun." Sakura smiled a bit proudly, and asked Kino,

"Say Miss Kino. Do you have painful or hard times during your travels?"

Kino nodded, "There are, once in a while."

"Did you ever want to quit?" Sakura fixed her gaze at Kino, who was drinking her tea.

"Nope, I would still continue."

"Is that because you believe it is something you have to do?"

Kino shook her head to Sakura's question, and answered, "It's because it's what I want to do."

With a satisfied smile, Sakura lifted her mug to her lips . After two gulps, she changed the topic by asking, "Miss Kino. During your travels, haven't you met a wonderful person, the person who is destined for you?"

Kino was slightly taken aback, and with a sour face, " Nope, too bad. However, there were a lot who ran away after seeing my persuader."

The two laughed. Soon Sakura's parents came, having finished their work. They sat beside Sakura. Her mother suggested, "Sakura, you can go on a journey if you like."

"Eh?" Sakura, surprised, looked at her parents' face.

"Just like Miss Kino, you could go around places, see different things, and study. After that, you can become a tour guide here. When we saw Kino, we thought learning that way isn't a bad idea."

"Really…?"

"What do you think?"

Sakura was slightly troubled for a while, but soon shook her head and smiled. "No. I'm not going anywhere. I will study here, and become the number one tour guide here. That is my dream! Besides, I already have wonderful teachers here, right? Father, Mother."

The two looked at each other. "I see… That's good too. In a while, you will surpass us and we will be left with nothing to do, huh?" The mother asked, and her daughter quickly replied.

"You bet!"

And the family laughed in joy.

Kino gazed at them, as if she was witnessing something from a different world.

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country. Kino did not wake up with the dawn like usual.

The sun was already high in the sky when Hermes woke up on his own, and was quite surprised upon finding Kino still in bed. He then let out a loud voice and Kino woke up.

Kino quickly jumped up from the bed. She looked at the sun out of the window, shock painted all over her face.

"What's wrong, Kino?" Hermes asked, but with an expression saying that she herself doesn't know, Kino muttered,

"Strange… Maybe there's something wrong with my body today?"

—

"Miss Kino, there's a wedding nearby, do you want to watch?"

After eating her late breakfast, Sakura came to take the dishes away and asked.

Kino readily agreed, and returned to the room to take Hermes along. Together with Sakura, they headed to a nearby church-like building. Since it was not too far, she just pushed Hermes.

Beyond the crowd, the bride and groom stood, wearing clothing with muted colors.

They were young. Both looked only in their late teens.

"They sure get married young," Hermes noted.

"Normally, people get married after they're twenty. It's strange," Sakura answered.

The couple raised up a big bag onto a platform. The female guests rushed up in front. Sakura explained quickly.

"Together, they will throw lots of small bags to the guests. Mixed among those bags are a few containing a single tree seed. The number of bags containing tree seeds is the same as the number of children the couple

wanted to have. A legend goes that a person who greets the next morning with those seeds in her hands will become the next happy bride." While explaining, Sakura also looked like she wanted to participate. Kino noticed, and offered,

"Then let me also look for them. Two heads are better than one."

Sakura asked in surprise. "Is that okay?"

"It's all right. Let's go."

The two joined in with the crowd of women.

"Hmph." When the neglected Hermes grumbled to himself, the couple shouted out,

"We would like to have five children!"

Then together, they started to distribute the small bags . They threw one after the other, and the female guests frantically gathered the falling bags. They opened them, and when they found out that it was not the one they were looking for, they threw them near the other guests.

As Sakura searched just as desperately, Kino took her hand and pulled her out of the crowd.

"Here." Inside the bag Kino held out to her was a single big seed.

"Wow! …But how did you find one so easily?" Sakura asked in amazement.

"I've always been lucky," Kino said coolly.

"…Can I really have it?" Sakura asked to confirm, and Kino answered.

"Of course. It may not be enough to thank you for being our guide."

Sakura shook her head. "That's not true! I've never had one until now. I've always wanted it. Thank you very much, Miss Kino!"

"You're welcome."

Kino said to Sakura, who was embracing the bag affectionately.

—

When they returned to the hotel, several unarmed soldiers were standing in front of it. They looked at Kino, and saluted when they arrived.

"Miss traveler, it's time for you to prepare for your departure," one of them instructed.

Kino considered for a while, and asked casually, "Um, can't I stay for one or two more days?"

Sakura looked up at Kino's face in shock, and Hermes asked loudly, "Wha-! K-Kino, what's wrong with you?!"

"Nothing… You don't have to act that surprised."

Without changing their stiff countenance, "…I'm sorry , but when you came in, you declared only three days. It' s a rule…. Please make your preparations immediately."

Kino reluctantly began her preparations.

She refilled fuel nearby, and bought portable rations. The shopkeeper was a middle-aged lady with a stern expression, but when she asked for the price of the items, her answer each time was, "It's free."

"Is that all right?" Kino asked in disbelief.

"Of course. Because you're a traveler, overcharging is a problem. In exchange, please tell other travelers about this store. Tell them to shop here. If they buy in other places, they'll get bad luck," the woman said and gave a not-so-charming wink.

Kino and Hermes returned to the hotel, and quickly arranged their luggage. Sakura, her parents, and the aforementioned soldiers were all waiting for her at the front desk.

"If you're going to camp out on the western side, you should go to that mountain spur. Before that, there is a danger of falling rocks. Moreover, the road afterwards

will be downhill," Sakura's father described. "Indeed, that's a good place. There's also a small swamp nearby, and the scenery is fabulous," the soldiers added, and drew her a simple map.

"Here take this." Sakura handed Kino two bundles. Sakura's mother explained, "It's our country's traditional picnic food. Sakura helped me make it. You can eat the small package in the evening, and this one in the morning. It will hold out for a day."

Kino received the bundles, and faced all of the people gathered there.

"I'm truly grateful for everything." Then she held out her hand to Sakura and gripped the tiny hand, "Thank you. I've really had wonderful memories here."

Sakura squeezed the hand tightly,

"You're welcome."

—

Kino, who was now wearing her coat, and the luggage-laden Hermes, were in the plaza in front of the western gates. A large crowd has gathered in it, this time to bid farewell to the traveler.

For the last time, Kino faced the residents. "Everyone, thank you very much. I have been to many different places, but this is the first time I have received so much kindness."

Everyone there smiled, and clapped their hands on impulse.

Sakura squeezed her small body in front of the crowd and gave a springy bow. "Miss Kino, Hermes. Thank you very much for staying with us. Next time you visit, please come together with a nice person for your honeymoon. I'll reserve the best room for you," Sakura offered like a brilliant hotel manager.

Kino smiled. "Sure. See you again someday."

The crowd's cheers gushed forth.

"See you again someday!" Sakura said as she waved her little hand, and Kino returned a smile.

Then Kino pushed Hermes out of the inner gates. She didn't look back even once.

When she has passed through the outer gates, Kino started Hermes' engine. The soldiers sent her off.

"Please be careful," the soldiers said. Kino faced them, took off her hat, and bowed. After she was saluted, she launched Hermes off.

The soldiers did not loosen their stances until the motorrad was out of sight.

—

"Kino? That's rare of you to want to stay for more than three days."

Hermes talked to Kino as they rode through the forest.

"Yeah, I was surprised with myself too," Kino said and dropped the gear. Then she continued. "But this may be

for the best. If I had stayed any longer, I may have wanted to stay some more, and eventually, I wouldn't be able to will myself to leave."

"…You're really saying some strange things today. Oh , right, haven't you heard? It may be an omen for a calamity."

"How *rude*," Kino said with a light laugh.

Hermes turned solemn. "It's a great country, isn't it?"

Kino nodded. "It was really fun."

They ran for a while, and Hermes spoke as if he recalled something. "It was totally different from the rumors."

"Yeah."

"I wonder why?" Hermes asked.

"Who knows. I was worried about it at first, but I stopped caring along the way," Kino said, and a satisfied smile appeared beneath her goggles. Then she continued.

"If other travelers ask me what kind of place it is, I will tell them that it is a very welcoming and kind country."

—

They rode until it was evening, and arrived at a mountain spur. It was the place Sakura's father and the soldiers were referring to. Kino decided to camp out there.

She passed over a rope between Hermes and a tree, and stretched a tarp above it to protect against the rain. She spread out a blanket and placed her sleeping bag under it.

She opened the small package Sakura gave her. Inside it was a well-roasted wild bird. Kino ate it all up.

She boiled water drawn from the swamp and made tea . While holding her cup, Kino looked at the eastern scenery.

The moon gradually ascended from the ridges of the mountain, dimly illuminating the forest. Several clusters of artificial lights could be seen from afar. It was Sakura's country.

Kino lightly lifted her cup to a toast.

After finishing her tea, Kino entrusted the watch to Hermes. Then she crawled in the sleeping bag with her jacket and boots still on.

—

When the full moon has reached its highest,

Kino stirred from inside the sleeping bag, and quickly rose up. Hermes asked, "Kino? What's wrong? There's nothing suspicious. There are no animals nearby. The weather also seems nice."

"I couldn't sleep…" Kino crawled out of the sleeping bag and stood beside Hermes.

"Is it because you woke up late today?"

"No, that's not it." Kino asserted, her expression stiffening.

"I have a bad feeling…. I have this strange, grating sensation."

Kino slowly extracted Canon from its holster. Hermes looked on nervously, "W-what?" he asked. Kino did not answer, and looked alertly around her. Hermes also surveyed the surroundings for some reason.

The sky's light purple gradated to a white towards the moon. From afar, the silhouette of the lined-up black peaks could be clearly seen. The tiny clusters of light at the ground were from some people in Sakura's country who were staying up late.

Kino's expression was like that of a novice soldier about to ambush the enemy.

"There's nothing. Don't worry too much." Just as he tried to appease Kino, the ground began to shake weakly. A low rumbling sound echoed.

A dark mass rose up from the towering mountain on the northern side. It was like a gigantic cumulo-nimbus cloud in mid-summer, slowly swelling out. Except that under the moonlight, it had a thick gray hue, and it was born from the mountain.

When it has swelled to its maximum size, the edge began to crumble and roll. While the low rumbles resounded, it lapped up the slope downwards with an intense speed. From Kino's point of view, it was from left to right.

The molten mass eventually engulfed the tiny lights.

"What…? What is that?!" Kino shouted, pointing Canon's barrel towards it. Hermes explained absent-mindedly,

"If my memory serves me right, it's a volcanic eruption."

"A what?" Kino turned around and asked. Hermes spoke with a tone of a professor,

“Volcanic ash and pumice stone spouted out at high temperatures, flowing down a mountain surface at high speeds. A pyrotechnic show.”[10]

“…You mean a pyroclastic flow?!”

“Yeah, that’s it!” Hermes said and fell silent.

The pyroclastic flow surged towards the valley. Kino spoke as she looked at the vanishing lights. “If I go there now, will I be able to do anything?”

“No,” Hermes answered in a flash.

“……”

“The temperature of that flow is nearly a thousand degrees Celsius. A person would die before he knows it. The blood in their whole bodies would boil, and they will die from shock. Everyone’s dead. No one had time to escape. Even if you go there, there’s nothing you could do, Kino. You will just die,” Hermes calmly explained to the dumbfounded Kino.

“……”

Amidst the low rumbles, Kino flopped down right where she stood.

—

After some time, the surroundings became quiet, and later, the view to the valley became clearer. The moon has inclined to the west, and the sky to the east became paler. Kino had been sitting and gripping Canon in her right hand the whole time. Kino did not say anything, and Hermes did not ask anything.

—

When the night has fully subsided, the sky and the mosaic-colored forest returned to view. However, the country within the valley was now covered by a single ashen color.

Kino stood up. She returned Canon to its holster.

She mutely folded the tarp and collected the blanket and sleeping bag. She took out the big bundle inside the bag.

"Once I finish eating… let's leave," Kino said as she sat down near Hermes and opened the bundle. Inside was hard-baked bread and salted meat.

Kino ate everything in silence. Then as she was about to fold the bundle, she noticed a letter and a small package inside.

Kino took out the letter. The address and the sender's name was written.

"…It's a letter for us. From Sakura's mother."

"Read it," Hermes urged.

Under the sky that has brightened up considerably, Kino began to read the letter.

To Kino and Hermes. To the last travelers to visit our country.

By the time you read this letter, we probably are no longer in this world. Our country and our scorched bodies must already be buried underneath ashes. And perhaps you have witnessed it yourselves.

It has been exactly one month since we learned of that mountain's imminent eruption. From our scientists' investigation, we knew that a large-scale pyroclastic flow would raze our country. We were left with two choices: to stay or to abandon our homes.

We have made our decision. We chose to stay.

This may seem foolish to a traveler like you. But we were born and raised here. We know nothing of other places or ways of living. Perhaps we were not given a choice in the first place. Even so, we do not bemoan our fate. After that decision, we felt

somewhat relieved. We decided to live our remaining days as best as we can. Without cursing our destiny, or feeling hate and sadness, we spent every day to the fullest.

At that moment, we were overcome with surprise. By the time we disappear from this world, there is not a single outsider, that is, a traveler, who would remember us. I'm not sure if you are aware of it, but in the past, our country had acted impudently towards travelers, knowing full well that they were offended by it. We realized that the only memories that will remain of our country, is that of its rude inhabitants.

We vowed since then that if someone visited our country, we will give a heartfelt welcome. We want to leave that person with wonderful memories of our country and its people.

Ironically, no traveler came just when we have decided to change. Perhaps we were cursed by the bad reputation we have built for ourselves. Time silently flowed by. We were about to give up. But when there were only three days left, you came.

In behalf of our country, I receive you with all my heart.

Miss Kino, Hermes. Welcome.

P.S.

I was conflicted on whether I should write to you or not. But I want to tell you about this.

We made this fact known only to adults, to people over twelve years of age. On the day after the eruption, that is, by the time you read this letter, it is Sakura's twelfth birthday.

Miss Kino. When I saw you getting along well with her, we thought we could entrust her to you, even though it's painful for us. But last night, that child declared that she wanted to follow our footsteps and become a tour guide in this country. Since that is her dream, we decided to take her along with us, selfish though it may be.

Thank you for reading until the end.

"I see. Now everything makes sense," Hermes said.

Kino contemplated for a while, letter in hand.

Eventually, with a low, almost moaning tone, she muttered.

"Ego… This is ego."

Hermes spoke softly. "That may be true. But there's nothing you could do about it anymore. Either way, it's impossible to travel with two people on board."

Kino folded the letter and returned it to the envelope.

She took the other, smaller package. Inside was a folded piece of paper and a small bag. For a moment, she thought it resembled the bag she gave to Sakura. When she opened it, the seed was indeed inside.

Kino hurriedly opened the paper and read what was written in it.

"'*Miss Kino. There is no…*'"

Kino stopped. Her eyes opened wide and she stiffened . Hermes urged her to read the rest.

Miss Kino

There is no reason for me to hold on to this. It is yours.

Please take care. And please do not forget about us.

Sakura

Kino took a long breath and looked up to the heavens.

She stayed like this for a while.

Eventually, Kino slowly and carefully put away the letter and the bag inside her luggage.

At the same time, Kino took the box she received from the persuader smith. She attached the holster to the belt behind her waist.

She filled the magazines with small bullets. She put some inside her pouch, and one inside Woodsman. She loaded it and locked the safety, then installed it in the holster.

The Woodsman adorned Kino's back with its barrel inserted in the holster, looking almost bare in a glance.

"Looks great on you," Hermes said. Kino said nothing, but smiled a little.

Kino strapped the luggage on top of Hermes. When she started Hermes engine, its well-regulated roar resounded through the forest.

Kino wore her coat, put on her hat, and hung her goggles by her neck. The sun was slowly beginning to

show itself. It shone vividly on the mix of green, red and yellow. Kino squinted and put her goggles over her eyes. The lens reflected the light, hiding Kino's expression.

"It's a great country, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It was so much fun. …I have no complaints whatsoever."

Kino straddled Hermes and, "Shall we go?"

"Sure."

Kino looked back just once, gazing at the gently sloping valley painted with gray. She looked at the country buried underneath the ashes.

Then she looked ahead.

Eventually the motorrad rode away, leaving the place in silence.

“In the Middle of the Desert · a” —Beginner’s Luck · a—

Kino stood staring at a cloudless sky, in the middle of a stone and sand desert.

She looked down the stone well in front her. It was dry as a bone.

She had tried lowering a cup into the well, but there was no sound of water. And when she pulled it up, it didn’t have a drop of moisture on it.

This caused her to shake her head in dejection.

“Told you so! Something like this was bound to happen.”

This came from Hermes, who was propped up on a stand behind Kino, who wore a white shirt and a black vest.

“This is bad…” Kino stared into the stone well.

Hermes quickly chirped in, “We have to go back to Master. It’s still not too late you know.”

But Kino rejected the idea by shaking her head vigorously.

"No!"

"This ain't getting us nowhere."

Kino shook her head again.

"I know… but I don't want to go back."

"You are a stubborn one. I understand, but we can't go on without water. If you dry up that's just fine, but what will happen to me? I don't wanna be buried next to your mummified body."

"I don't want to end up a mummy either. But…"

"But what?"

Frustrated, Kino suddenly slapped her hands on the stone well and shouted into its depth.

"Why? Why must this be all dried up?"

"Karma is probably catching up to you. For God, that is, the power who protects travelers, is telling you to go home," Hermes reflected coldly.

Kino wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead.

"I am so thirsty after that shouting."

"Let's go back."

"No!"

"…You could at least take us somewhere where I could be found before dropping dead."

"Too bad, but I can't grant that wish."

After a short rummage through her packs, Kino removed a coil of rope from the luggage.

"Are you gonna hang yourself?" Hermes asked.

—

A large water-proof canvas hung on the rope tied between the stone well and Hermes. In the cool shades lay Kino.

"Kino. You asleep…or are you already dead?"

"No, I am not asleep and still alive…"

"If you don't make up your mind, you'll be dead soon."

"…Yeah."

"The way I see it, we have two choices: try to go back with whatever water we have left and receive an earful from Master for secretly leaving. Or stay in the desert until you die."

"Don't like either of them."

Kino pulled herself from the ground and got out from underneath the canvas.

A small gust of wind was picking up across the desert, sending some dust flying.

“Kino, a traveler needs to be decisive. No matter if you ’re a greenhorn or a veteran.”

Hermes tried to sound serious as he delivered the admonition.

But Kino paid him scant attention. She put on her coat, dragged the canvas off and covered Hermes with it.

“Kino?”

She smiled at Hermes from behind the water-proof canvas.

“No, what we need is luck.”

“Eh?”

“What a traveler needs is that boost after a long struggle, a little bit of luck.”

There was a single drop of water that fell on the canvas, followed by another and then another in a rhythmic drumming before finally coming to a roar.

It had begun to rain.

“Continuation: A Picture’s Tale”[11] —Anonymous Pictures—

My name is Riku. I am a dog.

I have long, white, bushy hair. I always look like I’m happy and smiling, but that doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

I am on a journey.

The truth is, I’m not the one on a journey. Because my master, Shizu, is traveling to nowhere in particular, and I accompany him at all times… well, I ended up doing the same thing.

—

Master Shizu was a young man who wore a green sweater at all times. He was born from a royal family in a certain country.

The citizens, as well as the royal family, lived a lifestyle of modesty and simplicity — apparently, it was a good country. When Master Shizu turned fifteen, his father carried out a coup, massacred the king and his relatives, and took over the country. Master Shizu fled the country and vowed to take revenge. In order to kill ' that man', he trained himself hard and endured various hardships. It was around that time when I met him.

Several months later, Master Shizu went back to his completely corrupted homeland. The people were made to kill each other in a competition in order to acquire citizenship. He joined this contest in order to kill 'that man' the moment the prize medal is handed to him. Of course, Master Shizu expected to be killed on the spot.

I tried everything to stop him from doing this… but to no avail.

Master Shizu continued to win the tournament with ease, and eventually, he reached the final match.

'You're free now, so you can go anywhere you wish. It was fun up 'til now. I will do what I have to do, based on what I believe in——'

Leaving me these cool words, he faced the match where his death is certain regardless of victory or defeat. I saw him off, gazing at his back.

—

And, as to what happened….

Master Shizu lost to his opponent, a young traveler called Kino. Well, I had a hunch that she was very strong. He was able to handle things very well from start to finish, but showed mixed feelings in the end.

However, in this traveler's hands, Master Shizu's and my own destiny changed. That's because in the final match, it was this traveler and not Master Shizu, who killed 'that man', by pretending to hit him with a stray bullet.

Master Shizu lost the match, but he survived, and his wish was granted.

Master Shizu looked for this traveler outside the country to thank her for killing his father. I also wanted to convey to her my sincere gratitude for saving Master Shizu. Perhaps, I will always remember this traveler as my savior for the rest of my life. The motorrad with her is one nasty fellow though…

Afterwards, Master Shizu decided to go on a journey ' until he finds something he wants to do'. Up to now, he's still wandering, and I have always been by his side.

"This painting of a tank is unusual," said Master Shizu.

We just arrived in a certain country, and we were in the lobby of a hotel. Hanging on the wall was a big oil painting depicting scenery of a tank's battle.

Master Shizu put down his luggage beside me. It was a big black cloth bag he was always carrying with him. It contained Master Shizu's favorite sword.

Master Shizu passed by the sofa, coming a little bit closer to the painting on the wall. At that moment,

"Please excuse me."

A man that seemed to be a worker in the hotel showed up, carrying a stepladder. He set the ladder in front of the painting, climbed it and removed the painting. Master Shizu asked in confusion,

"Oh. You're removing it? I was just looking at it."

The worker turned around without saying anything, and instead, the hotel owner nearby came and spoke to Master Shizu politely.

"I'm terribly sorry, dear customer. However, we can no longer use such an embarrassing decoration."

“Embarrassing?” Master Shizu asked.

“Yes. You see… we have used this painting as decoration for some time, but we no longer trust its value.”

“How come? It was even in such a splendid frame, and makes a suitable ornament. I didn’t find anything strange about it…,” Master Shizu said, and the owner made a truly complicated expression. He looked as if he wanted to explain everything, but was too ashamed to do so.

“Uhm… that’s quite…”

After mumbling for a bit, the owner spoke.

“That’s it! Have you been to the plaza, mister traveler?”

The plaza was located near the center of the country. As in any country, it was a public park, built with lawns, promenades, and water fountains.

When we arrived, a number of people have already gathered around a big bonfire, beneath the cloudy winter sky. It was a rather large bonfire, which would remind one of a burning car.

As we approached the bonfire, we realized that what was being burned were paintings, in great numbers. A variety of paintings, small and large, were being thrown into the fire one after another. Master Shizu made somebody show him one painting about to be pitched in. It was by the same painter as the one in the hotel, a painting of a tank.

"Thanks."

Master Shizu returned it, and it was immediately thrown into the fire. The canvas caught fire in no time and burned thoroughly.

The crowd in front of the bonfire was torn apart as a truck arrived. The truck's loading platform tilted, sliding

and dropping its contents beside the fire. It was a large quantity of thick books. The people scrambled and competed over throwing the books into the fire while saying things like, 'Trash!' or 'This bastard!' The books burst into flames, and cheers arose as the fire became bigger.

Master Shizu picked up a book. In this case, it was an art book on tanks. Judging from its exquisite binding, it must have been an expensive book.

"Are you a traveler? Do you want that book? Are you planning to keep it?"

An old woman asked Master Shizu. She was being led by a middle-aged man who seemed to be her son. Master Shizu shook his head in response to the last two questions.

"Then, give it to me so I can toss it."

Master Shizu glanced at me, and then handed over the book to the old woman. The old woman tossed the book into the fire with both hands. The paper burned completely.

"Such a waste," Master Shizu said while gazing at the mountain of fire.

"Hmph!" the old woman scoffed. And with a truly irritated tone, she spoke, "A waste you say? If we don't do this much, none of us would be satisfied."

"Burning paintings and art books… I would like to know the reason why you would go this far."

The old woman explained, "We were all swindled."

"Swindled?"

In place of the old woman, the middle-aged man answered Master Shizu's question. "…Like fools, we placed so much value over these useless things. We were very upset over it, so now we're burning them all. Please do not interfere."

"I won't interfere, but what really happened, to be exact? I would like you tell me, if it's not too painful to talk about it," Master Shizu asked with an earnest expression, and the man averted his eyes for a moment.

"It's fine. Go ahead and explain to mister traveler here what really happened," the old woman urged his son.

The man narrated. "Just until recently, this country was strongly influenced by the trauma from a civil war that ended five years ago. People killed each other for several years during that war."

"Eh, and then?"

"At the time when we were almost healed from the trauma, about two and a half years ago, a grotesque painting of a battlefield involving tanks went on sale."

"Oh, that."

"Yes… When they saw the painting for the first time, a number of people said something like, 'This painting has a wonderful anti-war message!' Perhaps, out of some selfish motive, the painting was recklessly rated as something of high value. All citizens, including me, were carried away by the mood that time. It was really foolish …" The man's face held a guilty expression.

Master Shizu interrupted. "The painter who made those paintings became well-known. Moreover, the value of the paintings rose."

"That's right…. Everyone bought it, competing with each other. The rich, out of vanity, competed and bid up the price. Since there was no way for penniless people like me to buy the paintings, we bought the art books, which were still expensive just for a reproduction. Everyone acted as if they were competent critics. Every single one would praise it, saying things like, 'What a good painting!' or 'Disputes are wrong after all,' while looking at the paintings. I was among those people."

"And then?"

"And then, when the craze grew to the point of absurdity, everyone came back to their senses all of a sudden. Everyone realized at once, that the war over five years ago no longer matters, and that the trauma from it was completely gone. At the same time, we also realized that we spent so much money for these trivial tank paintings."

"I see… That makes things clear. And so, everyone was upset, angry over their weakness, and so as not to

leave the slightest evidence, you decided to burn everything in a rage,” Master Shizu said with much admiration, but in a truly cynical manner. On the other hand, the man who had recalled various unpleasant things during his explanation was utterly depressed. He replied with a sad face.

“It was really foolish. When the paintings began to sell , we were already enjoying peace, deep in our hearts. Even if we remember our old wounds, it’s okay as long as we continue to look forward and enjoy the life we have now. Originally, we invested so much on these worthless paintings for that purpose…. In the end, our galleries were monopolized by this painter and his paintings.” And finally, “Bye then. Don’t make the same mistake as ours, mister traveler,” he muttered lifelessly. He then took his mother’s hand and left. Master Shizu saw them off, and glanced at me who was by his feet,

“‘Swindled,’ eh? What do you think, Riku?”

“They suffered the consequences of their actions. As a result, they are in a truly miserable state.”

“…I see,” Master Shizu murmured, as he walked a few steps towards the flame of the bonfire.

"It's warm."

—

If Master Shizu had no plans to go sightseeing, or was not constrained by anything in particular, we do not stay long in any country. There's nothing special to see in this country, so we departed the next day. Early in the morning, Master Shizu refilled his favorite buggy with fuel, and loaded it with portable rations and water.

Master Shizu drove the buggy towards the walls. I was on the passenger's seat, looking ahead.

The usual clouds were thick under the cold weather. Soon, snow began to flutter. Master Shizu, cold with just the sweater, wore his waterproof parka over it, as well as his goggles and gloves.

Suddenly, Master Shizu slowed down the buggy. We arrived in the country's outskirts. The stone walls, which

were so high it would make your neck hurt if you try to look up at it, gave off an air of intimidation. Only the parched ground can be seen in the surrounding fields.

Nearby, a small three-wheeled truck was parked, beside which, a young man was sitting on a folding chair . An easel with a fresh canvas placed on it was standing right before him. He was facing the scenery, looking at the gray walls.

Master Shizu approached slowly with the buggy. The young man slowly turned around. His expression truly lacked aspiration, like that of a dead man.

"What do you think?" Master Shizu asked me.

"It's probably the same guy."

"I see. But it might also be a different one."

Master Shizu cut the buggy's engine.

"Good morning."

The young man lightly hung his head, as Master Shizu , who got off the buggy and stood in front of him, gave him a greeting. He spoke gently.

"What an unusual buggy…. Are you a traveler?"

"Yeah. We're about to leave though. What about you? You're painting outside in this cold weather?"

"No… I can't paint anymore."

Master Shizu glanced at me once, "Eh. You painted before?"

"Yeah."

"Paintings of tanks?" Master Shizu asked frankly.

"Yeah," the painter answered.

"I saw some of them. I didn't think the paintings were *that* terrible…. It's really cruel of them to burn the paintings like that," Master Shizu said. Whether he really thought it cruel, I didn't know.

The painter looked at Master Shizu once, and hesitantly began to speak. "Even though they bought a lot of them… they suddenly told me that my paintings were no longer needed. It was really sudden. But that's okay, that's still fine with me. I was just painting what I please, paintings of the tanks I love. But… but they

burned my paintings just because they 'don't' need' them anymore. That made me very sad. I worked so hard on them, too…"

"I see," Master Shizu interjected meekly. The painter continued, as expressionless as ever.

"And then… and then I told them, 'If you're going to burn them, just give them back. I'll just use them as decoration, or perhaps add them to my collection.' But everyone said things like, 'Are you kidding?' or 'We won 't feel satisfied unless we burn these!' So cruel… Even the head of the art gallery I was with said this: 'We don't need your paintings anymore. We definitely won't sell them. Well, even though it's just a fad, everyone has really gone overboard. Even so, you and me have made huge profits. You have my gratitude. I can quit working in the gallery now. You can also live the rest of your life any way you want. However, stop painting. Well, originally, your talent was so-so, anyway.' …I remember it so well, don't you think?" The painter smiled, as if ridiculing himself.

"……"

“I became rich. And so I earned the hatred of the people in the country. Everyone thought I deceived them . Even though I was just painting what I love…”

“What were you doing right now?”

“…Before, I would set up my easel in various locations , but now people in a lot of places would throw stones at me so, I chose to sit here where no one comes in. I can’t paint pictures of tanks anymore. The truth is I wanted to paint, but for some reason, I don’t feel like painting. I don’t feel like I *could* paint. Just now, I was trying to divert the unpleasant feelings inside me somewhere else. When my mood cleared up a little, I just came up with something weird, and made scrawls. It’s not that interesting, but it’s better than doing nothing.”

“Hmm… and where is that?”

The painter turned his eyes towards the loading platform of his truck.

“Would you show it to me?” Master Shizu asked for permission. He opened the loading platform and took one of the several oil paintings inside.

I don't understand anything about paintings, nor do I have any interest. However, when Master Shizu saw that painting, he gasped in surprise for a moment.

"This is…!"

Master Shizu was only able to say this much, and became speechless for a while.

The painting depicted a lot people. Everyone had various facial expressions, and all of them seemed to be laughing. Sneering.

After some time has passed, Master Shizu asked the painter behind him, while holding the painting in both hands.

"This… have you shown this to an art dealer or to any other person?"

"Hmm? Nope. But, there were some who have seen me painting it."

"What did those people say when they saw this?"

"They told me that it was 'a waste of paint'."

"……"

"I don't really care. It's not really something I like to paint in particular."

Master Shizu returned the painting carefully, and turned to the painter.

"Hey, mister. I think… uh… that painting was very detailed. In the castle… no, I mean in my parents' home, there were various decorations, and you see… there was an annoying but knowledgeable guy there, so I also have a little knowledge…"

It was really unusual for Master Shizu to be so agitated .

The home Master Shizu was referring to was the royal family he was born in, and the annoying guy was his father. It seems that before the rebellion, his father invested a considerable sum on paintings.

"…And so, well, that painting of yours… is quite amazing… That is…"

He was able to say this far. Master Shizu who can't fully express his feelings became a little frantic. Then he shouted.

"Why can't this be sold?! Does everyone in this country have empty heads?"

The painter did not change his expression at all.

"I don't really mind if no one's willing to buy it. After all, I already have lots of money. It was money I earned from 'deceiving' and 'exploiting' everyone. I don't need to worry about getting hungry."

"……"

Master Shizu was speechless for a while. And then,

"Mister, don't you want to show that painting to other countries?"

"Hmm?"

"I visit different places. I have no doubt that it will sell, and at a remarkable price at that. It will be appraised highly. What do you say?" Master Shizu suggested

excitedly. However, the painter did not change his gloomy expression.

"I'm not interested."

"But…"

"If you want, I can give them to you, mister traveler. If you promise you won't burn them, you can have all of them. That is, if you think you can make money by selling them…" the painter said.

Master Shizu's became gloomy. "That's impossible… I can't transport the paintings in my buggy without damaging them. It's really a pity. Well, I'll just do this then."

"Hmm?"

"I will make you known in the countries that I visit from here on. Maybe someone will come to buy. If that happens, sell them. You might become well-known."

The painter shook his head. "That won't make any difference. I'm not concerned about money. Besides, I don't really want to paint weird stuff like that. If a person does buy one, and asks me to paint more of it, I would

refuse. The truth is what I wanted to paint was pictures of tanks. I…"

And then the painter slowly began to cry. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

"I love tanks. I want to paint more and more pictures of tanks. But I can't paint anymore…"

"……"

The painter opened the box by his feet and took out his tools. He put some color on the palette, and suddenly started to paint. He briskly put color on the canvas while crying. It became a painting depicting the faces of humans who were laughing somewhere.

While the painter's face was stained with tears, his hands worked nonstop, and finished the oil painting with astonishing speed. Master Shizu observed everything in silence. Probably he was deeply moved and also dumbfounded.

"Phew… I'm going home," the painter muttered, showing not the slightest interest in the finished painting , and secured his tools. He leaned the painting on his seat , folded the easel and loaded it in his truck. And when he

lifted the painting, Master Shizu came to his senses and asked.

"T-that painting. W-what are you going to do with it?"

"Nothing. I don't want to throw it away, so I'll just set it aside somewhere. If you want it, I can give it to you."

Master Shizu's eyes carried a firm expression for a few seconds. He lightly shook his head a few times but he wouldn't avert his eyes from the painting.

"What are you going to do?" the painter asked.

As Master Shizu slowly stretched both of his hands towards the painting, I interrupted, "Where are you planning to hang that painting?"

"Guh…!" For a moment, Master Shizu's face became grim. And then, his outstretched hands slowly dropped. "No… It's a pity, but I can't take it."

"I see." The painter stacked the painting into the loading platform, bid us farewell, and left on his three-wheeled truck.

Master Shizu came back to the buggy and sat in the driver's seat. Still looking ahead, he placed his right hand on my head and stroked it gently. And then he muttered,

"It's cold."

"Yeah."

Master Shizu took one big breath, and started the buggy's engine.

Afterword (Note: contains no spoilers of the text) — Preface (contains no NETABARASHI of the text.) —

[Greetings]

Hello, everyone. This is Keiichi Sigsawa. I truly thank you for patronizing my novel, “Kino no Tabi II —the Beautiful World—”.

[Description]

This is the second volume of the light novel series, “ Kino no Tabi”.

It is comprised of tales about the travels of the main character Kino and her partner Hermes, along with a number of additional stories. These take a short story format, each one independent from the others (with some exceptions).

Rather than a continuation of the previous volume, it is an incoherent, non-chronological collection of stories.

The length of each story is not fixed, with some going beyond fifty pages, and some concluding in just seven. For details, please refer to the table of contents.

As in the previous volume, this book was lavishly embellished with Mr. Kouhaku Kuroboshi's wonderful illustrations.

[Ingredients]

One book contains:

Paper

Ink (Some colored)

Glue

[Indications and Effects]

Entertainment, Artwork appreciation, Time-killer, Stress-reliever, Mind exercise, Japanese practice, Kanji practice, Novel-writing rules practice (including bad examples to learn from), Dengeki Bunko research, Shelf

decoration, Bragging rights (I have read it!), Sleep inducer, Provides spoilers to post on the net, Cover for instant cup noodles, etc.

[Dosage and Administration]

Use as many times as desired.

For the first intake, read in order according to chapter.

[Warnings]

- Be warned that reading in dark places for long periods of time will strain your eyes.
- In case it makes you feel bad or gloomy, discontinue use immediately and think of cheerful memories.
- When used during class, be careful not to get caught by your teacher.
- For some people, it may trigger discharge of lachrymal fluids and nasal mucus.

- This book is not intended for use in the bath. As much as possible, please refrain from using it in the bathroom (especially while bathing).

- To read this afterword in times of necessity, keep it in a safe place (there is no need to detach it).

For other concerns, refer to the text “Kino no Tabi —the Beautiful World—”.

Autumn, 2000

Keiichi Sigsawa

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Story covered in anime episode 2.
2. ↑ More commonly known as rabbit fever.
3. ↑ Hermes mentioned a not so funny pun. The man said *'tachioujou'* meaning to get stranded or passed up, while Hermes said *'daioujou'*, which means peaceful death.
4. ↑ The source story for anime episode 8, which made a few changes.
5. ↑ Has almost nothing in common with anime episode 9, which has the same title. "Nothing is Written!" is likely a reference to a quote from the 1962 British film, Lawrence of Arabia.
6. ↑ From here on, there will be tons of foreign-sounding terms. Since I can't make heads or tails out of what they are (maybe they're just made up), I'll just translate as literally as possible.
7. ↑ The only chapter to receive three adaptations (anime, game and drama CD).
8. ↑ *Nekura* means gloomy, while *okura* means slow. The English dub of the anime circumvents this complication by using the name 'Lily' instead, to rhyme with 'Silly' and 'Willy Nilly'.
9. ↑ Depending on interpretation, he may be referring to himself, to the revolver, or both.

10. ↑ This was changed so much because Hermes just has to have his pun (at such a time, no less). Originally, Hermes says ‘pyroclastic flow’ first and mistakes ‘household tools’ for ‘volcanic eruption’.
11. ↑ Title says it all. It’s a continuation of the story in Volume 2 Chapter 5: A Picture’s Tale -Happiness-. This story, as well as its prequel, were included in the second Kino no Tabi visual novel.